
Shoutarou Mizuki
Demon King
DAIMAO
ACT 11


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AS IF IN ANSWER, THE NEW DEMON KING SPREAD
HIS HANDS UP TOWARDS AN UNSEEN SKY.
"THIS IS... AMAZING. I CAN SEE THEM.
I CAN SEE EVERYBODY'S RECORDS."


"UM... I'M NOT SURE HOW TO SAY THIS, BUT..."
AKUTO BURIED HIS FACE IN KEENA'S HAIR AND BROUGHT HIS LIPS TO HER EAR.
"UM... OKAY..."


Character Introduction
JUNKO HATTORI
A pure-hearted class rep who's in love with Akuto. Unable to hide her shock at Akuto's words.
AKUTO SAI
Our "good" protagonist, who was prophesied (again?) to become the Demon King. How will he react to the revival of the first Demon King, Zero?
FUJIKO ETO
A black mage and herbalist who swears loyalty to Akuto. Rides the demon beast Cerberus.
KEENA SOGA
A ditzy airheaded girl who's taken a liking to Akuto. Who is she, really?
MIWA HIROSHI
A troublemaker who calls Akuto "Boss." He is also the hero "Brave."
KORONE
A Liradan responsible for guarding and observing Akuto. But she has now been taken over by 2V and Zero.


LILY SHIRAISHI
The student council president, known for her classy hat.
MICHIE OOTAKE
The student council vice-president. She can transform into a flock of bats. Talks weird.
ARNOUL
A tall Liradan who is student council secretary. Normally only says “guwa.”
KANNA KAMIYAMA
Student Council Treasurer. She can transform into a wolf, and ends every sentence with “gyah.”
YOSHIE KITA
After being partially responsible for Zero's revival, she took a liking to Akuto and began to help him. Now she's at the academy for no good reason.
KEISU
A tiny Liradan who was sealed in VPS with Zero. Now she has no purpose in life, and so is staying with Yoshie.

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Prologue

The leather sofa in the room was an antique, and the table was hewn from a single giant tree. But other than the desks and chairs, the only decorations were the abstract paintings on the wall.

A strange group had gathered here, in this room overlooking the palace in the center of the Imperial City. Several of them were wearing masks to conceal their identities, but from their silhouettes it was clear that they weren't human. The ones who weren't wearing masks, on the other hand, all had handsome, striking faces. It was like someone had gathered together a group of unforgettable men.

"If the Jeweled Branch's seal has been broken, then all the people around the world who carry the blood of the imperial family will begin to return to the Empire. Which means..."

One of them spoke. He was a handsome man, the sort some might derisively refer to as a "dandy". His name was Kento Kurahashi. He was a member of C-MID8, and the smartest and most capable of them. His codename was USD. He was famous as perhaps the greatest genius humanity had, and was the only one of the members whose identity was not kept secret.

"...For our part, no matter who these others might be, we want to continue to support the existing Empress." Kento looked around the room in search of agreement. It was clear that he was the member of the group with the most influence. But there was one voice who spoke out against him.

"You always jump to conclusions, without allowing for any debate. The government never interferes with the doings of the royal family. And C-MID8 is now nothing more than a group of individualists, correct?"

No one in the room appeared to speak, but the voice could be clearly heard. Kento answered, without seeming to find this strange at all.

"Individualists or not, we need to come together for the sake of our original goal. I'm referring to, of course, the wishes of the late Boichiro Yamato. Specifically..."

The voice cut him off, as if it already knew what he was going to say.

"...To appease the outer universe. Or, failing that, to fight and defeat it."

And then, the voice added its own thoughts.

"...Appeasement seems the more likely of the two options."

“I hope you’re right,” Kento said coldly, and then looked down at his feet. There was a large dog curled up around him. It was a long-haired breed, with droopy eyes buried beneath a mountain of fur. If it wasn’t moving, you might think it was a particularly large mop. The dog lazily craned its head and looked up at Kento. Its mouth began to move.

“But since I’m the one saying it, perhaps we can’t be so sure?” The long-haired dog was speaking human words. Kento didn’t seem perturbed by this. He shook his head as if he was sharing his gripes with an old friend.

“Even if you were one of them once, we still don’t know that for sure.”

“It’s true. I don’t represent *them*.” The dog put a particular emphasis on the word “them.” His codename was “The One.” He was a very rare type of talking dog. But in truth, he was...

“You’re the only human from ‘their side’ on this planet. Don’t tell me you don’t represent them.” There was a cold edge to his voice.

The One bared his dog-like fangs, and smiled a sarcastic smile.

“That’s one way of looking at it. But still, I betrayed them.” There was a strange sort of tension between the two. It was a girl’s voice that broke it.

“Kento, One, that’s all you ever talk about. So, what exactly do you want us to do?” The girl’s only movement was to put a hand up against the side of her head, and then tilt her neck a little, but somehow it seemed strangely seductive. Both Kento and The One slumped their shoulders, as if they no longer felt like fighting.

“Kei, what I’m trying to say is that we all need to come together to protect the Empress,” Kento said. The girl he’d called Kei brought a hand to her chin and looked upwards.

“Hmm... but it’s not up to us to decide whether the Empress is worthy of that or not. The Demon King’s on her side, right? Doesn’t that mean that if anything, we’re her enemies?”

“But the Empress is the only one who can use the Jeweled Branch. And we need the power that it awakened. It’s probably the only thing we have that can fight the Outer Universe. Still, if that’s all, then it doesn’t matter who the Empress is. We’re going to use her power for our own ends no matter who she is, right?” Kei leaned back in her chair and put her hands behind her head.

“That’s right. But the power is used by the Empress. But all we need is the power itself. That’s where the issue lies. Which means we need to convince the Empress to obey us,” Kento explained, but Kei seemed to still not understand.

“Do we actually expect that to work? Is that Demon King going to do what we tell him?”

“Given what we know about his personality, I don’t expect any problems. He’s afraid of the Empire’s way of life coming to an end. Which means that we can talk to him. Or perhaps I should say, we can take the people of the Empire hostage. Either way, protecting the existing system is going to be important, right?”

“Does that mean that the plan for me to take his place is being called off, then?” Kei leaned further back in her chair, her feet coming off the floor.

“That’s dangerous, so I think we should avoid that. You’re our ace in the hole. I’d like you to listen carefully to say about what you should do, and refrain for any foolish actions.”

Kento’s tone was slightly different than it had been before. It was as if he was being respectful of her, but also that there was something more. Kei leaned forward and sat up in her chair.

“Alright. If you say so, Kento. You’re probably right.”

“I am, Kei.” He smiled at her. Then, Kei seemed to remember something.

“Oh, right. Aren’t we supposed to call each other by our code names? Don’t call me Kei, USD. People will think there’s something going on between us, even though we’re both men,” Kei said, and laughed. Kento’s expression was hard to describe.

“You’re the one who didn’t use my code name to begin with, Esper.”

“Is that right? I try to keep my personal life and my work separate. Right, Kento?” Kei gave him a look that was clearly meant to be meaningful.

“Stop that. People will think we’re in some kind of special relationship.” Kento shook his head, but Kei’s gaze only became even more meaningful.

“Who cares what people think? It’s important to get along with your co-workers. And anyway, don’t you think The One is just itching for a chance to betray us? ’Cause if we help another Empress, and they get the power of the Jeweled Branch, then the one who actually uses it will be... you know?” Kei looked around the room.

Kento coughed a little, and The One just laughed.

“Hahaha! Your one flaw is that you sometimes act like you’ve really got the psychic powers that your name implies.” But Kei just grinned back at him.

“I’ve got exceptionally good intuition. I’m working for Kento. And I’m willing to do anything for the sake of my job. Listen, One. I’m not going to let you betray us.”

The One shuddered, but in a clearly sarcastic manner.

“This is the only place I have left. I’m going to do whatever I can to ensure humanity’s survival.”

“Enough of this talk.” Kento cut them off. “...Humanity is in greater danger than it’s ever been before.”

1 - Empresses, Gather!

The old knight's wrinkled brow furrowed with an even deeper exhaustion.

His name was Joji Yuki.

He was the oldest member of the Royal Guard, and in this world of long lifespans, he was among the very oldest. And even in his long life, he had never seen anything like the person in front of him. And what was worse, was that this person was the Empress.

"If we're all part of the royal family, then we should all be friends. If we all eat a meal together, we'll be instant friends. That's right, we can all line up in a row, and eat with our chopsticks at the exact same pace. One, two, one, two. Like that. If you just focus on eating white rice, you can forget anything bad that's bothering you!"

The person sharing this unique theory of conflict resolution was Keena Soga, the current Empress.

"Your highness," Joji began. His voice was calm and level. "What is it?"

"Are you suggesting we hold a banquet?"

"Nope. Just eat white rice. Those banquets always have big, complicated courses, right? You can't get to be friends like that." Keena's eyes were shining, and she was totally lost in her own world.

Joji coughed slightly.

"You want the other candidates for Empress to eat nothing but white rice? White rice?"

"Yup! Won't it be wonderful?"

"I'm afraid, your highness..." Joji's expression was that of a man undergoing horrible torture. "...I don't think that's going to work. If anything, it will only spark conflict."

"Oh, okay..." Keena sounded disappointed, but then she slapped her hands together as if she'd suddenly had a wonderful idea.

"I know! If we all have a sleep-over..."

"Your highness..."

"What is it?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but are you following what I'm saying?"

"Yup. I've got it. Now that the seal on the jeweled branch has been broken, everybody who has the royal bloodline will gather in one place, right? And the Jeweled Branch is actually the key to unlock the seal on some incredible power, so I need to be careful..."

Keena's explanation was simple, but not very detailed. That said, even Joji didn't know much about the branch.

“This is what the legend says. The Jeweled Branch will choose the true emperor. And the true emperor will revive the ‘Faceless Power’ and lead the people...”

The legend he was referring to was an imperial one. Legends were usually things found in civilizations that hadn’t advanced very far. But in the Empire’s case, that wasn’t true. The Empire had been a single nation for over a thousand years, even before the dawning of magical civilization. So the legend wasn’t just a story, it was based on information that, for some reason, had been hidden in the past, which had partially leaked and become rumors that had formed the legend’s base.

“What’s the Faceless Power?”

“A power without a face, presumably. It’s believed to simply be a power for which no particular use has been prescribed,” Joji explained.

“But it doesn’t really matter what that is, right? I heard that the first problem was that a lot of people were going to show up had the imperial bloodline...” Keena said.

Joji nodded and displayed a map on his mana screen. The map showed in red the island that formed the empire’s center, as well as the vast territory that stretched towards the continent. As he pointed to the southern edge of the territory, Joji began to explain in a serious voice.

“Except for your highness, most of those who carry the imperial bloodline are those who have lost some past power struggle. It’s common for them to be seeking some form of revenge. For example, this region. We believe that someone from the bloodline is here, but there is a terrible reason why this land is sealed...”

Before he could continue, a young member of the Royal Guard rushed into the room.

“Something’s happening at Constant Magical Academy...!”

“You’re in the presence of the Empress. Control yourself,” Joji said, and the knight quickly straightened his posture.

“I beg your pardon. As I was saying, something is going on at Constant Magical Academy. The academy...” The young knight trailed off, still standing at attention.

“What is it? It’s rude to simply stop talking in mid-sentence. Even if the current Empress is a kind girl, you still lack discipline.” Joji began to lecture the knight, but he shook his head.

“I’m sorry, commander, but...”

“What is it? Now you’re cutting me off again...!”

“No, um...” The young knight fearfully pointed behind him. “The Empress has fled again.”

“What?” Joji turned around to see Keena’s clothes on the floor. Of

course, her underwear as well.

“I’ve served the imperial family for well over a century... and I’ve never seen a royal who was this much of a handful...” Joji began to break down and cry, and the young knight simply sighed and decided to continue.

“Constant Magical Academy has suddenly been covered in huge plants. We believe it to be some kind of Affu magic, but an enchantment of that scale requires several casters to control it, which means it’s likely a large scale attack...” Joji gasped and looked upwards.

“It must be someone from the place I was just talking about!” Joji turned towards where Keena had been a moment ago, but quickly realized how stupid he looked and turned back to the knight.

“No, um... I see. Contact the academy immediately. It must be a Marlai invasion!”

○

The students had been driven out into the yard of the academy... no, even further than that. Both students and teachers were standing helplessly on the hill that had once served as the Imperial camp during the Demon King War.

“Since we know it’s magic affiliated with the god Affu, it’s not much of a mystery...” Mitsuko Torii whispered.

“Yes, that’s the only sort of magic that could make plants grow like that...”

Next to her was Yoshie Kita, who had converted (without permission) the school’s basement into her own personal lab. She lifted up the analyzer goggles she’d been wearing and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands.

“But I don’t even want to imagine how much energy it would take to accomplish something like that...”

Both of them were looking at the school building, which was now covered in green. No, that was far too mild a way to put it. The school had turned into a jungle. The building itself was covered by a canopy of tall trees, and vines and branches were poking out all the windows. It looked like the building had been abandoned for hundreds of years. Affu was a god who granted blessings for agriculture and fishing to his followers.

Whoever it was had used one of his spells, which was used to make plants grow faster and thus speed up the rate at which crops could be harvested. Specialized plants which could absorb mana were able to absorb water and nutrients from the soil, and grow at an incredible rate. But the faster the rate of growth, and the more plants you tried to control, the more difficult it became to control the mana.

And the magic used this time went even beyond that. It wasn't "difficult" so much as "impossible," at least for most of humanity.

"Were there multiple casters, then? But I didn't see anything to indicate that somebody infiltrated the grounds." Mitsuko crossed her arms.

"If it was one person, they'd have to be on the level of the Demon King," Yoshie said, and then looked over to Akuto Sai, who was standing nearby. Akuto shrugged when he noticed her.

"Well, drat. I'm going to have to get violent with someone, aren't I?"

All the other students were staring at him. It was natural that they would. Akuto was now the biggest troublemaker at school. And this was an especially weird case. The whole school had turned into a jungle overnight.

Akuto didn't know what was going on either, but he was pretty sure it had something to do with him. No, at this point, he was almost resigned to it. He was even starting to think that instead of trying to insist that it wasn't his fault, and dealing with the inevitable consequences, he'd do better to just deal with it himself.

"I'll take a look. It's almost certainly dangerous in there."

Any normal person would hesitate, but Akuto headed over towards the building like he was taking a walk.

"It's so amazing to see he doesn't feel like he's in the slightest danger at all..." Fujiko Eto whispered to herself in awe as she watched him go. This was going a little far, even for somebody as in love with Akuto as her.

Junko Hattori, who was standing nearby, interrupted her.

"It feels more like he's just in a little bit of a different world... Normally you wouldn't be able to walk into a bizarre world like that so calmly..."

But Fujiko just snorted.

"Hmph. If you think so, then you should just leave Akuto alone. If you can't handle this, then you never should've said you liked him."

"What...?"

At the inn "Sasahara," Junko had inadvertently confessed her love to Akuto, and received a straight (almost too straight) answer. Just remembering it made her want to scream and run away.

"B-But that was... He said he loved everybody, and he didn't really mean anything by it..."

As Junko stammered, Fujiko's face took on a victorious grin.

"Hmph! I expect better from you. Every one of us has to give our utmost to support him, as his mistresses."

"M-Mistresses?"

"You don't understand the responsibilities that come with your

position. Somebody like you, who's only good for straight-up fighting, should be right by Akuto's side."

Junko's face began to twist with doubt.

"Ugh... Y-You're right, maybe I should've gone with him. But it feels like I'd just slow him down... No, that's not okay. I need to get stronger..."

Mitsuko, her teacher, interrupted her with a clap.

"Come on now. Don't be silly. Akuto's the only one who needs to go. Unlike everything else that's happened so far, this is actually a problem involving the school. So you need to do what your teacher tells you. It's dangerous, so he goes alone. Everyone else can hear what he has to say and give him advice."

Mitsuko looked towards Yoshie as she spoke.

"Well, you heard the lady. Can you hear me, Akuto?" Yoshie glanced over at Mitsuko and then sent a telepathic message to Akuto.

(I can hear you just fine. It doesn't feel like there's any kind of jamming) Akuto replied. He was already pretty far away.

"Hey, that's not fair! I wanted to be the first to contact him!" Fujiko jumped on Yoshie's back and pushed her face into the goggles so that she could join the conversation. Yoshie staggered forward, just barely managing to avoid falling over.

"Hey! If you want to talk to him, use your own student handbook," Yoshie complained. "And anyway, Akuto can hear multiple telepathic calls at once without needing any kind of device..."

"Oh, that's right. Akuto! Can you hear me?" Fujiko leapt off and began her own call, but this time, somebody jumped on her to interrupt.

"Mugyah!" Fujiko moaned. It was Korone who was pressing up against her with all her weight.

"We just got word from the palace. What happened now seems to be related, they say." Korone sent her own telepathic message.

"H-Hey, get off me..."

"The name of the tribe is the Marlai," Korone said calmly, ignoring Fujiko.

"The Marlai have a strange history. They live in the depths of the jungle, on an island far to the south. The land technically belongs to the Empire, but its existence is kept secret. The reason for this, supposedly, is that the first tribe leader carries the blood of the royal family."

"What? I had no idea..." Yoshie said, and then looked over to Akuto Sai, who was standing nearby.

"That's crazy..." Even Fujiko, who was still struggling with Korone's weight, let out a surprised and confused gasp.

"Surprisingly, it all got its start with a theme park..."

○

(Surprisingly, it all got its start with a theme park...)

Akuto heard Korone's voice echo in his head as he approached the school building. He was already forced to step over low bushes and high grass to get any closer.

He recognized the area as once being the yard outside the cafeteria, but now it looked like the entrance to a jungle.

"A theme park?" Akuto asked, and Korone continued her explanation.

(That's right. During the dawn of the Empire, there was a plan to turn an entire tropical island into a theme park. But the plan failed. The reason is unknown, but since the reason was kept hidden, some great secret must be involved.)

(Kept hidden? The data isn't around anymore?)

(That's right. What I'm telling you is information I learned from one of the oldest of the royal guards. Which means that the secret is that a member of the royal family was involved in this theme park.)

(The royal family, getting involved in a theme park?)

(It was more than just a theme park, you see. There are rumors which indicate the following: "A relative of the imperial family is having so much fun at the jungle-themed park that they refuse to return home. He has called himself the ruler of the Marlay, and begun to live the life of a primitive.")

"That sounds like somebody's idea of a joke..."

Akuto looked around. After hearing this, the jungle around him seemed to take on an aura of madness.

"It's only later that they realized it was no ordinary theme park, probably. Anyway, be careful. We don't know what's lurking there.)

"I understand that, but you know..." Akuto sighed.

—Who could honestly take a theme park seriously?

That was what bothered him. From what was going on, these Marlay were probably behind this, but that was only if you believed the rumors were true.

—But why would anybody want to do this, anyway?

He pushed through the branches and found the entrance to the school, then went inside. His thought had been to first go to the highest place in the school. If somebody was behind this, they'd probably made their base at the center of this, or its highest point. That was just how humans worked.

The floor of the school was broken here and there by roots. The trees must have been very powerful. He looked around the area as he climbed up the stairs. As he got to the top floor, he saw no signs that anybody had touched the plants. Which meant that nobody had been

there since those trees had grown.

"So I guess I've looked everywhere, then..."

He was in the top floor lounge, where the ceiling was made of glass. With the jungle around him, it felt like he was in a greenhouse. The air was warm, and the scent around him was calming. The afternoon sun was shining slanted through the ceiling, forming a gentle curtain of light as it passed through the leaves. If the situation hadn't been so serious, he would've felt like taking a walk with a cold drink. But the voice he heard the second he stepped into the lounge wiped the smile off his face.

"Are you strong?" It sounded like the high-pitched voice of a child.

"Who's there?" Akuto shouted into the center of the lounge. He had no idea where the voice had come from.

"I'm the one asking the questions. ...No, I shouldn't even have bothered asking. You're strong, aren't you?"

The voice was echoing throughout the room. It was impossible to tell where it was coming from.

—How is it possible that I can't detect her mana?

Akuto focused on his surroundings. They were emanating a specific type of mana wave that acted like static on a phone line. The trees seemed to have a unique mana frequency that was very similar to that of the voice's owner.

—So whoever it is, they're literally one with the trees, huh?

That was probably the reason they'd filled this place with trees. Akuto readied himself for battle just as the voice spoke again.

"I've come in answer to the Jeweled Branch's call! You're not the Empress, are you? Nonimora is here for the Empress! Bring her the Empress!"

Nonimora seemed to be the name of the person he was talking to. And from what she was saying, she was just who Akuto had expected her to be. He had a terrible feeling that just like he'd heard, she really believed the theme park was real.

"The Empress isn't here. If you want to negotiate with her, you'll need to go through the proper channels," he said, just to see how she'd react. The answer he got wasn't what he expected.

"You're the one who doesn't understand the proper channels! The Jeweled Branch picks the true ruler! The candidates must compete to see who is superior!"

—So she knows what she's doing here?

That was surprising, on some level, but at least he could talk to her.

"By compete, you mean fight?"

"That's the problem with you people from the main island! Abandon your cruelty! We compete to understand each other. We can

whack-whack, or we can rub-rub!"

"W-Whack-whack?" Akuto wasn't sure what that meant.

The voice answered immediately.

"You don't know what whack-whack is?" it said.

"N-No..."

"Or Rub-Rub?"

"No..."

"How is that possible? Fine! Thwick-thwick, then!"

"I don't know that one, either... Actually, wait. It's not my job to decide how you compete, anyway."

"That's true. So bring me the Empress."

"The people of this country didn't even know the Jeweled Branch existed. So I don't know what I'm supposed to tell you. It would help a lot if you went to the palace first and talked to them." Akuto decided to tell her the truth.

She seemed, to some degree, trustworthy. At least, from the way she was talking, she seemed to be the type who wouldn't bother with any complex plots. But he'd underestimated just how simple she liked things to be.

"That's too much work! You're with the Empress, right? I can feel strong mana from you. More than a normal person."

"I guess I am, yeah..."

"Are you, or are you not?! Nobody but the Empress could be so strong! Let me ask you then, is the Empress stronger than you?"

"Well..." Akuto thought of Keena's face.

"...I wouldn't stand a chance."

"That's amazing!" Nonimora's voice was happy and cheerful.

"Then let's Thwick-thwick!"

"What, exactly, is thwick-thwick?"

"Hmmm... Well, Thwick-thwick is thwick-thwick. But here's how it works. You run around, and then whoever touches the other person's body with both hands first wins!"

The pitch of Nonimora's voice leapt upwards at the end. She'd probably jumped up. Akuto sensed a presence behind him and jumped forward. A broken branch fell right where he'd been standing.

—Hmm?

He felt a sort of premonition, and then jumped to the right. A wind blew by him on the left. Somebody had raced right by him.

"Oooh! You dodged it!" The voice sounded happy. He looked in the direction he heard it from, but there was already no one there.

"She's fast..."

Akuto tried to find her, but he kept sensing the same thing no matter which direction he looked. Whenever he saw movement and turned towards it, it was only the rustling of the trees.

—!

He felt a gust of wind, and jumped aside instinctively. A tan-colored shadow passed through the corner of his eye.

"You dodged it again!" The voice sounded happy once more.

—Um... What am I doing here, exactly?

Akuto wasn't sure. He tried to contact someone telepathically, but even though there was no jammer, the waves given off by the trees were creating too much interference.

—Maybe I'm just supposed to catch her?

He spoke again, just to see how she'd respond.

"Can I use magic?"

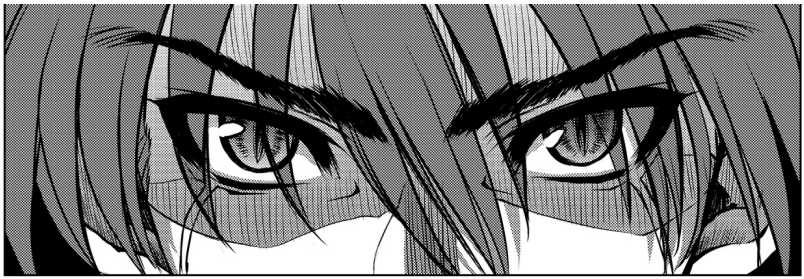
"Sure, go ahead!" Nonimora answered.

"Alright then..."

He ignored his opponent for a moment and waved his hand in a languid motion. A torrential hurricane of mana sprung up in the room.

"Uwooooahh?" Nonimora gasped in surprise.

The mana hurricane began to spread out, centered around him. The trees began to bend and snap. They seemed to be the type with flexible trunks, but once the wind pushed them to their limits they snapped in two and were blown over. By the time the wind stopped, the floor was covered in shattered branches and trees spreading out in a spiral, like the site of some giant's folkdance.





“Aryaryah?” A small child was standing there in shock. Even from a distance it was clear that she had dark skin and big bright eyes. There was something about her appearance that gave a favorable impression, regardless of your gender.

She looked like a child, and it was hard to see if she was a boy or girl. Her clothing was like what you’d see worn by a jungle tribe, but the leather was exquisitely decorated, and there were large jewels studded here and there. It was a simple outfit, but gave her a noble aura.

Akuto shook his head at her, a bit confused.

“Ready to give up?”

But Nonimora flailed her arms around in frustration.

“I’m not giving up! I’m gonna punish anybody who doesn’t treat nature with respect!”

Akuto furrowed his brow.

“Nature...? You grew all these trees yourself, instantly. How is that natural?”

“Uwooah! Now I’m mad! You people from the main island always make fun of our love for nature!”

She threw an exaggerated tantrum. It was cute, he thought, but he couldn’t bring himself to agree with what she said.

“You used mana on those plants to change them, and controlled the way they grew. That’s not what I’d call natural...”

“Why do you always make fun of us like that? You people from the mainland are such jerks! How much do you even know about us Marlai, anyway?”

“I heard you believed a theme park jungle was real and moved into it.”

“That’s fine. But we don’t think it’s real! Our trees are the same as the things you call buildings! We know that!”

“Huh? Then why...” Akuto didn’t expect this response. The Empire had turned magic, which was just a social system, into a religion. Only the priests and a few members of the intellectual class treated it as something transient. The rest treated it as dogma, even though the truth was public knowledge. Were the Marlay doing the same thing?”

“...Don’t tell me that only the rulers like you know the truth, and you’re tricking the rest of them.”

“Grr! Don’t make fun of me! Everybody knows! Even the kids learn about it in school!”

“Well... what do you mean?”

“Science and daily life are incompatible. Life is best the more like an animal you live. You can make plenty of food to eat. You don’t get sick and your life is easy. But people of the empire don’t think of themselves as happy, do they? It’s because you’re not having any fun

in life. That's why the Marlay got rid of the rules. The theme park was just a source of inspiration."

"I see..."

Akuto fell silent. He was utterly shocked. Probably because the Empire was so huge that it seemed like the whole world to him, and this was the first time he'd felt a glimpse of the world beyond it. That, and Nonimora was surprisingly intelligent. Her way of thinking was similar to his, and in the Empire, he was considered a heretic.

"You understand?" Nonimora puffed out her chest, stretching her body backward as she did so.

Akuto smiled and nodded.

"Looks like I misunderstood. I apologize. And after hearing that, I want to know more about you and your kingdom." Nonimora's big eyes opened even wider.

"Oooh! You understand? Then let's play more thwick-thwick!"

"Sure, but you won't get anything even if you beat me," Akuto said, but Nonimora just nodded happily.

"That's fine! I just want to play it because it's fun!"

Before the game could resume, though, a voice called out from above.

"Ackie!" He couldn't see her, but Keena was up above their heads. He looked up just in time for someone to grab the jacket he was wearing from behind. Keena put the jacket on, and then revealed herself.

"If you know you're going to be naked, then just keep your clothes on..." Akuto sighed, but Keena just pouted.

"I can't get out of the palace wearing clothes."

"The palace!" Nonimora shouted, "If you live in the palace, are you the Empress?"

Nonimora must have had surprisingly sharp intuition, because she'd deduced that the Empress was Keena. Most people wouldn't assume that from looking at her.

"Yes, why?" Keena asked, a little surprised.

Akuto considered trying to deceive her for a while, but with these two, that was probably impossible.

"I was just talking with her. This is Nonimora, of the Marlay. She's a candidate for Empress."

"Oooh," Keena looked over at Nonimora. Nonimora looked up at Keena with wide eyes. She was the first to speak.

"Wow! That's just what I'd expect of the Empress! Complete and total nudity!"

—Was THAT what she focused on?

Akuto sighed, but Nonimora continued on, oblivious.

"If you walk around naked, it must mean you're telling the people

to return to nature, right? That's amazing!"

—Well, at least they'll probably be able to work this out peacefully... Akuto felt a little exhausted, but also relieved. But even as Nonimora smiled, she started running towards Keena at full speed.

"Okay, back to our game of Thwick-thwick! This time it's the Empress's turn!"

The first person to touch the other won, and you were allowed to use magic. That's what Nonimora had said. In a place with nowhere to hide like this, the sport wasn't that much different from magical combat. Just like he'd expected, Nonimora began to fire mana at Keena from all directions as soon as she started to run. Her plan was probably to tackle Keena while she dealt with the attacks.

"Kyah!" Keena screamed. Akuto instantly moved in front of her, knocked the balls away, and then blocked Nonimora with a mana shield.

"Uwoooah?" Nonimora tried and failed to push through the shield, before giving up and falling back to regroup.

—I was acting on instinct, so I wasn't holding back. Did I go a little too far...? Akuto asked himself, but Nonimora grinned.

"Uwooah! This is great! Wow! You're a lot stronger than you were before!"

"Glad to hear it. But listen. The empress isn't cut out for this sport. I am, but she's not."

Nonimura looked disappointed, but dropped her combat stance.

"Aww. That's no fun. Nonimura likes to exercise."

"The Empress doesn't even know what's going on here. Can you explain? I'd like to hear it, too."

Akuto told Keena what he'd just heard.

Nonimora added some things here and there, but in the end, they didn't get much information about the selection of a new emperor or empress.

"So whoever the Jeweled Branch reacts to needs to be the Empress, right?" Keena said.

"That's right. And it's said that the Jeweled Branch decides this, but in the end, it's just a tool, so whoever uses it is the Emperor or Empress. But first, that person has to be chosen," Nonimora nodded.

"Well, I don't really care about being Empress..." Keena said, disinterestedly.

"Huh?" Nonimora looked at her in surprise.

"I said I don't really care about being Empress."

"No, no. You can't quit the job that easily. Well, of course, if you want rid of it I'll gladly take it from you," Nonimora said, before crossing her arms awkwardly.

"Did you come here because you wanted the title of Empress?"

Akuto asked, confused. Nonimora didn't seem like much of an invader to him.

"The Marlay aren't greedy like that. The question is what the Empress does with her title. And Nonimora, no, the Marlay, have a duty we have to fulfill."

"A duty?"

Nonimora hesitated for a second, before nodding and opening her mouth to speak.

"That's right. The Marlay have protected the Faceless Power for generations."

"Oh, I remember the old guy in the royal guard talking about that. He doesn't know what it is but it's really strong, he says."

Nonimora shook her head.

"That's not what our traditions say. The people can leap into the faceless power using a ship that travels to the stars with the aid of the Jeweled Branch. The Faceless Power can only do good things with guidance of a good heart. Otherwise, it will destroy their entire race.

"Is that... a legend?" Akuto asked. Nonimora shook her head again.

"It's the words of our first elder. So it's not a legend. The ship that goes to the stars exists, too."

"But how can it go to the stars when..."

"That's right. All projects to go past the moon, or past the planets that circle the sun, were stopped. Nobody thinks about space anymore. There's probably something like a wall out there in space, far away. And if you go out there you can touch it. That's what they think."

Nonimora's words matched the impressions Akuto had. Boichiro Yamato had once talked about an invasion from the outer universe... Maybe there was something out there beyond that wall.

"I'm not sure what counts as a 'good heart,' but maybe we can work together," Akuto said, looking over to Keena. But Keena seemed unsure. She put her finger up to her cheek.

"But then, couldn't we make her empress anyway?"

"Nonimora doesn't like people who don't fulfill their great duty. You have the three sacred treasures, don't you? Those are the symbols of the Empress."

"That's true, but... I didn't want to be one in the first place."

"Oh..." Nonimora stood in front of Keena and put a hand on her hip.

"...Then I'll take them. I'll get a nice bonus, too."

"A bonus?" Keena tilted her head, confused.

"Him." Nonimora pointed at Akuto. "I could tell when he protected you. You're restraining his power with the three treasures,

right?"

"Oh!" Keena gasped. She knew what Nonimora meant. Giving up the treasures meant giving up her relationship with Akuto.

"I refuse. I've changed my mind." Keena shook her head.

Nonimora looked disappointed.

"Hmm... I see. And Nonimora liked him, too! I'd love to have him by my side. But the Marlay know that people aren't things. So how about this? I don't need to be empress, but I want your help protecting the Faceless Power. And he has the right to decide, too. You and Nonimora can both do Hem-Hem with him, and he'll decide who he likes better." Nonimora slapped her hands together as if she'd just come up with a great idea.

"Hem-hem?" Keena and Akuto asked.

Nonimora's mouth hung open a little in shock.

"You don't know Hem-Hem? It's human instinct! You came here naked so I was sure you'd know it."

"Huh? But I don't. You use different words." Keena said. Nonimora sighed and held up a finger.

"Hem-Hem is when you put a boy's ryun-ryun in a girl's pakku-pakku and make babies."

"Huh?!"

"Huh...?"

Akuto gasped and Keena went bright red. Nonimora seemed confused by their reactions.

"Why are you acting so weird? It's natural. It's the best way for girls to compete over a boy they like. If he likes us both, then all three of us can be together."

Maybe it was natural, Akuto thought, *But...*

"Hang on. Nonimora, you're sure you're a girl?" He'd thought she'd sounded feminine, but it was hard to tell.

"That's right. How rude. Now, it's Hem-Hem time. Let's do this!" Nonimora spun her arms in a circle like a pitcher warming up.

"No, wait. Hang on a minute!" Akuto frantically waved his hands.

"What's wrong? Why not give it a shot? It's not like the old days when you could get sick. And there's magic to stop you from having kids, too," Nonimura said, unperturbed.

"T-That's not the issue." Akuto shook his head.

Keena was grabbing on to Akuto's arm and glaring at her.

"Ackie doesn't do stuff like that!" she yelled, but Nonimura was unmoved.

"It's not right to try and keep a man all to yourself! You can have a favorite, but you should still lend him out at least once a week!"

—Our values are so different we can't even communicate...

Thankfully, help arrived.

“You! Kid! AKUTO IS MINE!”

Normally it was a bother when Fujiko said things like that, but this time, he was glad to have her. Fujiko came into the lounge, with Yoshie behind her. They must have been monitoring the situation.

“Oh, there’s a lot of people here now! So your name is Akuto, huh? You’re really popular. If you and I can Hem-Hem at least once... no, maybe twice a month, I’m sure you’ll like me too, though.”

Fujiko looked angry for a moment, before reconsidering. She began to nod her head.

“Hmm... Yes, you’re right! Akuto is kind, so of course he’ll start with a rotation. But gradually he’ll start to choose his favorite! That’s a great idea! I think for four... no... five days out of the week, he goes to me. Then he gets one day to spend with the others, out of pity, or perhaps duty. And then he gets a day off.”

“Ooh! That won’t happen as long as Nonimora is around! Nonimura is much better at Hem-Hem than you!”

“With your tiny body, you couldn’t use any techniques! But with my ample proportions, I can do all kinds of things to him...” Fujiko ran her hands across her body to emphasize her point.

“I’m really good at Suppo-Suppo, too! I can knock out a demon beast!”

“Come on, that’s enough of that guys...” Akuto tried to get them to stop, but then another voice shouted over him.

“If you choose me, you’ll be able to perform all kinds of terrible acts that no human body could endure.”

It was, of course, Korone.

“Please stop making this worse,” Akuto turned to her.

“What Nonimura said is worthy of serious consideration. The decision you made earlier is likely to be respected, Akuto, but the government has decided that it’s going to handle this matter.”

“If nothing dangerous is involved, we’ll just have to obey, then,” Akuto said, but he couldn’t shake the bad feeling he had.

○

Several days after Nonimora came, the government announced that they were forming an expeditionary unit comprised of the Empress, Akuto, and the royal guard.

Akuto had thought that, while he’d be extremely busy, the rest of the students at the academy would be doing nothing. But in fact, Student Council President Lily Shiraishi was forcing them to participate in a certain job.

“Lots of off-the-books money is being used, so somewhere someone is doing something big with magic. Why can’t you understand something so simple?”

Lily had gathered Fujiko, Yoshie, Junko, and Hiroshi in the student council room. The others were seated but she'd forced Hiroshi to stand in front of his desk while she lectured him. Hiroshi looked apologetic, but he was pouting slightly as he defended himself.

"I'm the only person here who's not from a priest family..."

For some reason, his household had been given the Brave Suits, but unlike the others they weren't high-ranking priests. Lily had told them to investigate what C-MID8 was doing, but he knew nothing about the various churches.

"But you're the only one who can do anything really illegal. We can't send you telepathic messages during the operation, so you'll just have to use your own judgement."

Lily was speaking to him like she was his instructor. Hiroshi felt like he was just being bullied for no reason.

"But even if we know they're using the money, we don't know where. I mean, we do know that C-MID8 is getting more active lately. We know that USD, the guy we met one time before, is planning something too. But I don't know what to investigate..."

"I already explained that. All the diet members connected to the churches have secret meetings with corrupt priests. Infiltrate the meeting areas and gather information."

"But I don't know who these corrupt priests and diet members who are doing something dangerous are."

"I just gave you a list."

"But there's too many people on it!"

"You're just gonna have to figure out when the people on the list are going to do something. It's gonna depend on that information."

"But I don't know what that information is!"

"That's true, I guess." Lily sighed and crossed her arms. "But still..."

Yoshie, who'd been silent up until now, interrupted.

"...I don't think that Miwa's going to be able to find out too much. That USD guy seems to have learned the secrets of the Brave suit from Boichiro Yamato himself."

"But he hasn't done anything to stop Hiroshi yet. If we're lucky, he might come to see him again. And then we can get information from him directly."

There was a thin grin on Lily's face. Hiroshi could tell that she was trying to make herself cross a very dangerous bridge.

"But USD is staying in the shadows. The guy's got a ton of money on his own, anyway. So why would he be using government money if he wanted to keep things a secret?"

"I get that, but now that that little Marlay girl showed up, it makes sense that C-MID8 would be using government funds on her," Fujiko

said.

"Yeah. But it's too much money to just be investigating the Marlay. And we know they aren't actually doing that, either. Thanks to Keena, we've got access to all the information the royal guard has."

Yoshie's explanation was, Fujiko felt, convincing.

"That's right. But there's a lot of money being used here... Which means maybe it's not USD's plot at all."

"In these days, the only things that need money are teleporations that eat up large-scale energy, and magical experiments based off of them. The exception being guys like Akuto Sai, who can just consume the energy on their own. Which means I don't know what they're up to..." Lily folded her hands above the desk.

"What if C-MID8 is split into different factions?" Junko mused aloud. Everyone turned to look at her.

Junko flailed her hands a bit, surprised that her comment had attracted so much attention.

"Well, um... the Suhara Church wasn't exactly all on the same team, you know. So I thought that a group like C-MID8 might be the same way. Especially after Boichiro Yamato died."

"That's quite possible. Which means that we've been thinking about this the wrong way all along. We should be looking at the other members besides USD..." Lily said, and then turned to Hiroshi.

Hiroshi stood up straight and stiff, like a student who'd been napping just before being called on by the teacher.

"Well... I kind of knew you were going to say that."

"Don't be like that. I'll give you a starting point, at least. Here's a list of people to check."

Lily pulled up a name list on her mana screen and slid it towards Hiroshi. Hiroshi took it, his shoulders twitching a little when he saw the names. There was a huge number of them.

"This is a little too many..."

"Of course it's a big list. It's a list of everybody who goes in and out of C-MID8's building, even those who don't work there. It's all the subcontractors, too. Subcontracting is a perfect camouflage in this business."

"But when am I going to have time to go on a date?"

"You horny little boy. Don't say that with her big sister right there." Lily tilted her head in the direction behind Hiroshi. Hiroshi had just totally forgotten. The idol he was dating, Yuri Hoshino, was actually Yuko Hattori, Junko's little sister.

"If you start having a bad effect on Yuko's work, I'll kill you instantly..." Hiroshi heard a blade being drawn behind him.

Without looking behind him, he awkwardly stepped forward.

"O-Okay, I'm getting off to work."

“Thanks.” Lily waved a hand and watched him go.

○

Hiroshi wasn’t slow to act, but things were moving fast. Now, a dog and a seductively charming boy were watching a single ship. It was a large, flying ship, and one made with every imaginable bell and whistle.

“The Imperial Airship, huh? I’ve always wanted to ride it,” the seductively charming boy, C-MID8 Code name “Esper” (AKA Kei) said.

“Dogs enjoy different things than humans do, so I don’t agree,” the hairy dog said. This was codename “The One”.

The imperial airship was moored to the palace courtyard. The two of them were watching it from atop a building in the city’s center. The courtyard was covered with trees and impossible to see into, but the ship itself was too high for them to hide. The hull was white and curved, its surface reflecting the light of the sun. On the other side of the mirror finish were detailed and intricate patterns that changed color and even shape depending on the angle you viewed them from. It was a ship of fantastic beauty.

“It’s going to the Marlay village along with two ships of royal guards, right?”

“That’s right. And Morlock is already aboard,” The One said, his doggy mouth opening and closing as he spoke.

“I’m jealous. I’m sure it’s one hell of a ride.” Kei crossed his arms behind his head. There wasn’t much enthusiasm in his voice.

“He’s not a normal person either, so he probably has different ideas about what makes for an enjoyable ride, too,” The One said, and then looked up at Kei. Since The One had the face of a dog, it was impossible to read his expression. But his voice was low, as if he was sharing a secret.

“By the way, that scared the hell out of me. Publicly talking about betrayal, even if it was a joke. You’re not going to tell me you can’t betray USD, are you?”

“It was a joke. And a good one. And USD already knows, so who cares?” Kei said, his voice low as well. But his tone was perfectly clear, and there was a seductively charming smile on his face that didn’t seem to befit a young boy at all.

“...But even if he’s noticed your betrayal, he probably doesn’t think I’ll betray him. Well, I guess betrayal is just another form of love. Isn’t that what they say?” Kei grinned, and The One shivered.

“Since I’m an alien, I became very good at figuring out what it is that humans are thinking... but I have no idea how to tell what’s going through your mind. I thought you agreed to have your body modified for USD’s sake. The project to strengthen you was his idea.”

“Hey, from your perspective, does it look like Kento loves me?” Kei asked, suddenly serious. The One nodded.

“It seems that way to me. At least, I hope he does. I need him to believe that you’d never betray him.”

“Heheh... I see. That makes me feel a little better.” He stretched out his arms and his expression quickly changed. Now he looked like he was really having fun.

“Okay, I’ll go meet Kento now. We have a meeting. He’s thinking that in addition to the Marlay, there’s another candidate for the royal title who’ll be coming.”

“A meeting, huh? Between two men.”

“Even aliens are prejudiced, huh? Well, whatever. I’m doing this because I have things I want to do.” And then he waved his hand and said goodbye to The One.

Once he was gone, the look on The One’s face became cruel, so cruel that you could tell what it meant even though he was a dog.

“I don’t understand human psychology, huh? But there’s nothing so logical as psychology. Humans either obey their desires, or submit to threats...” No human being was watching his expression as he spoke.

○

“Ackie! Look! They’re giving us free food! Free food!”

“I don’t think Empresses are supposed to talk like that.”

Keena and Akuto were aboard the Empress’s personal ship. Keena was just having a great time, but Akuto was searching the place for intruders. Since Keena had released the restraints on some of his power, he was able to detect even the slightest mana disturbance. And even the Royal Guards had their lifelogs constantly read by the Gods. He was able to see what they’d be doing, as well as all their most personal secrets.

—So there’s no sign of anybody sneaking onboard, huh? I hate to do this to the knights, but I had to be sure. Akuto apologized to them, at least in his mind. He knew he had to do it, but he still felt guilty.

“Nothing seems out of the ordinary,” Korone said. She’d just now walked up beside him.

“Then it should be a fun trip,” Keena said, hanging off of Akuto’s arm with a bright smile. On the other side was Nonimora, who was pulling on his sleeve.

“Don’t forget about me! There’s no point in going without me, after all!”

The four of them were all onboard the ship, heading for the Marlay village. The Royal Knights were bringing two ships with them. There were barely any guards aboard the royal craft, at Keena’s

insistence. The knights had been surprisingly willing to accomodate this, their reasoning being that it was easier for Akuto to respond to danger if there were no knights around.

"I'll explain our flight plan. We'll leave the capital and head south. This location on the map here is the island." Korone displayed a map on her mana screen.

"At the center of the island is the Marlay village. It's far larger than you'd expect a village to be. It's approximately the same size as the capital city's downtown area."

"So it was a pretty big theme park, huh?" Akuto said.

The inside of the ship was luxurious, with carpet on the floors, and rooms the size of luxury condos, with all of the amenities you'd expect from one. Akuto was sitting on a circular sofa in the center of the cabin, listening to Korone's explanation while trying to bat away Keena and Nonimora, who were leaping all over him like playful dogs.

"That's right. But the island itself is very large, and the majority of it is covered in jungle. The jungle's trees are the type that absorb mana, which is why it took the imperial mainland so long to find it. Of course, they were planted artificially." Korone's explanation continued.

"But Nonimora said that people from the village had come to the mainland, and they've built themselves a magical civilization, so they were still under the influence of the Empire, right?" Akuto asked. It was Nonimora, not Korone, who answered.

"Yes, that's right. The Marlay are followers of Ahf. But we get the blessings of the god without having to give it our logs, and we can control what it sees, too. That's because we can use part of the Faceless Power." Nonimora smiled as she spoke, but this information was shocking to Akuto.

"So that means that the black mages' utopia actually existed all along?"

"So it would seem. But it's only possible because of the Faceless Power." Korone had heard the same thing from Nonimora before Akuto. She explained this to Akuto, and added something else.

"But we don't know exactly what the Faceless Power is, or what effects it may have. However, we have seen a similar power." She glanced over at Keena.

Akuto didn't want to say it in front of Nonimora, but he knew exactly what she was talking about. He remembered the moment when Keena had altered everyone's memories.

"Hmm, it feels like stuff's starting to come together." Akuto looked over at Keena.

She paused and looked up at him, before turning away with a pout.

“Anyway, we’re going to maintain altitude over the jungle and come down in the village. Nonimora Kananoni, as a relative of the Empress, has invited her for a visit. That’s our official pretext. Of course, our real reason is, as Nonimora suggested, to study the power of the Jeweled Branch. We’ve brought an investigation team along with the knights, so keep that in mind.” Korone finished her explanation. Akuto had heard the same thing from Joji, the old knight, several times.

“I’m aware. Let’s get to work, then,” Akuto said.

Korone headed for the control room. She was steering the ship all by herself. When Korone was gone, Nonimora started to perk up even more.

“Alright, let’s start with some Hem-Hem!”

“No, you promised not to do that onboard the ship... Actually, I’m not going to do it at all...” Akuto pried her off of him, and then, since she still looked upset, offered to make her something to drink.

“Look, there’s a bar. I can make you something. Of course, there’s no alcohol, but I can make something you like...”

But as he stood up, someone grabbed him and pulled him back. It was Keena, not Nonimora.

“What is it?” Akuto asked. Keena just fidgeted as she pulled on his sleeve.

“Come on, what is it?” He asked again. Keena spoke in a small voice.

“Um... should I... do it too, you think?”

“Huh?” Akuto leaned closer, unsure of what she was saying.

Keena blushed as she continued. “Ackie, if you want... we can do it.”



“Do what?”

“Um... Hem-Hem.” Keena was staring into his eyes.

She didn’t look like she was joking.

“Um... isn’t that... kind of wrong?” Akuto said seriously, as he backed away from her.

“Ackie!” Keena pulled on his sleeve again, but he shook her off and headed for the bar.

“Haha... Um, what do you want, Keena?”

Nonimora was overjoyed to see this, and began to bounce around on the sofa

“Oh? Ooh? Ooh? So did you fall for Nonimora’s charms? Did you?”

“No, I didn’t...” Akuto said, frowning. As he made something for them to drink, he changed the subject.

“So, does the Jeweled Branch itself have any kind of power?”

The box with the Jeweled Branch was on the table. It was the thing that Nozomi Sasahara’s family had protected for generations. Nonimora’s face took on a serious expression.

“The first member of magical civilization was said to be the Emperor. My ancestor, you see. The Jeweled Branch tells those whose royal blood is especially strong that the choosing of the next heir has begun. That’s what it was made for, I think.”

“And if it was kept hidden in the Sasahara household...”

“That means that the imperial family in the capital wanted the line of succession to be hereditary.”

“I see. So that’s why... There’s a lot of history around it, huh?” Akuto went back to the sofa and put the drinks on the table. Suddenly he felt something soft on his left arm. Keena had grabbed on to his arm again.

“What’s wrong?” Akuto asked, but Keena didn’t answer. She just rubbed her body against him.

“Rub rub...” She murmured as she rubbed her cheek against his bicep, and pressed her chest against his forearm.

“Listen, you’ve gotta stop that...” Akuto disentangled himself again. Keena pouted unhappily. It was unclear if she was upset, or just not certain what to do.

“You’re acting really weird today,” Akuto said, but all Keena did was fidget. She didn’t say anything.

“Oooh! You guys are having fun! I guess I’ll rub up against you while I continue talking about important things!” Nonimora said, as she grabbed his right hand and started to do what Keena was doing. But when she opened her mouth, strangely, she was in fact talking about important things.

“It’s said that there are several candidates for the throne, that is,

descendants of the first Emperor, scattered around the globe. The line which eventually came to rule the Empire continually betrayed them." While she was talking, Keena had grabbed tightly onto Akuto's arm again. Now he couldn't brush both of them away.

"And they say that the Jeweled Branch is also the key that will activate a ship that travels to the stars," Akuto added, and Nonimora nodded.

"That's right. The Ship that Goes to the Stars flew through space once, and it brought back part of the Faceless Power. That's why I can use part of it. That's what that Liradan was saying."

"Then that power is..." Akuto began, but then Korone walked into the room. Some time had passed since they'd left port. Akuto thought that they might've arrived already, but he was wrong.

"I'm sorry to interrupt. I have a report."

"What is it?"

"This ship is going to crash."

"Huh?"

"It's descending. It is no longer responding to my commands." She was saying this so calmly that it didn't sound like anything important, but it was a serious situation.

"W-Wait. How? Are we under attack?"

"No, if anything, we were the attackers. The cause is unknown, but control of the ship was taken over from inside. And then the ship used its self-defense weapons to shoot down the two royal guard ships near us."

"Taken over from inside? That's impossible. There's nobody in here but us..."

"Hence the mystery. But we have to accept reality for what it is. That is: this very luxurious ship is about to crash. We should prepare to evacuate."

"...G-Got it." Akuto stood up and ran to get his travel bag. Fortunately, he'd put all the things that he and Keena would need in a large bag that he hadn't opened yet.

"Huh? We're crashing? Really? It's been so quiet." Keena turned a confused look toward Korone.

Korone nodded.

"I'm afraid it's true. In order to make the voyage as pleasant as possible, the soundproofing and position stabilizing are top-notch."

Korone forced open the cabin door. Suddenly the wind came blowing in. When they walked over to the opening, they could see a green carpet of jungle spreading out below. It seemed oddly close, and they could tell that they were descending while staying perfectly level.

"We've already reached the island. We'll just fall into the jungle," Korone said.

Akuto turned back towards Keena and Nonimora. The two of them didn't seem bothered. Nonimora seemed to be having a great time. Well, Keena could fly, and there wasn't much to worry about in Nonimora's case.

"But be careful. The jungle is full of mana-absorbing plants. The mana within is unstable."

By the time Korone finished, though, the others were already outside the ship. "Oh... Right."

"Huh? Then I can't fly? ...Wait, I can't fly! Gyaaah!"

"Hahaha! Don't worry! Just look for a tall tree in the jungle and try to bounce from one leaf to another on it. You'll be fine!" Nonimora said and laughed.

—It's crazy, but I guess it's our only hope.

Akuto grabbed Keena as he fell. When he looked up, he saw Korone, slowly descending in her parachute.

2 - A True Hero

“The Empress’s ship has vanished?” Lily asked. Junko had brought her this piece of classified information. The two of them were facing each other across the student council desk.

“It just happened a moment ago. Of course, this is extremely classified, so I wanted to make sure you heard it and nobody else did,” Junko whispered.

“Who’s responsible?” Lily asked. There was a mix of anger and suspicion on her face. She clearly had a possible culprit in mind, but Junko didn’t have an answer for her.

“There’s no information yet. But no matter who it was, he’s with her, so it should be fine..”

Lily tapped her fingers on the desk, annoyed.

“Akuto Sai? Of course, it’s stupid to worry about the Empress herself. What I’m asking is whether C-MID8 is responsible.”

“What do you want to do about this?” Junko asked. Lily grimaced.

“You must be an idiot, if you don’t know the answer. I’m going to crush C-MID8 because I don’t like them. Ever since that Nonimora girl showed up, everybody else has been really concerned with the fate of the Empire. But for me, this is all I’m interested in.”

“Then it’s a personal vendetta? I came to you because I wanted to protect the others from whatever plot is unfolding...”

Junko leaned forward, her face flush, but Lily was unmoved. She reached out a hand and thwapped Junko’s forehead with an index finger.

“Idiot. Just come out and say that it’s for Akuto Sai. And let me tell you something. Whether it’s politics or anything else, most of the world is dictated by personal objectives. You could even say that selfish vendettas were the driving force behind humanity’s evolution. Remember that. Someday, we’re going to be priests. And when that happens, if you’re still unsure of yourself, it’ll be too late.”

“That’s crazy...” Junko said, putting a hand to her forehead.

“Whether you believe it or not, someday you’ll see for yourself. Nobody does this job just to protect the empire. It’s possible that C-MID8 could even issue an order to your family, the Hattoris. Well, you violated an order like that once, so you already understand that.”

“No, I...”

“No need to defend yourself. If you understand what I just said, then go persuade your father.”

“Huh?” Junko was confused by this sudden change of topic.

“Royal guard ships were shot down. The knights aren’t gonna like this. Though I’m sure that C-MID8’s got a way around the problem. Probably they’ll blame the Marlay or something.”

“Oh... I see.”

“Which means that the Hattori will be the ones commanding our forces for war. No, we can’t even let things get to that point. War’s easy enough to start when a country’s leaders see that the people want it.”

What Lily said made sense, and Junko was embarrassed that she hadn’t thought of it herself. She drew away from the desk slightly.

“Yes... I understand.”

“Civilian rule is pointless. Whoever is the best at manipulating the populace comes out on top. And that’s the problem with it.”

Lily laughed.

Suddenly a message came in from Hiroshi.

“...Excuse me. What’s up?”

It was Hiroshi’s voice. He sounded like he was in a hurry.

“I’m about to initiate pursuit. I’ve found one of them.”

“Got it. Send me regular updates on your position.” Lily ended the call, and grinned.

“Okay, they’ve started to make their move.”

“You’re going to follow Hiroshi, right? Should I go with you?” Junko asked. Lily shook her head.

“No. You handle your dad, first. And if Hiroshi found someone, that somebody is a decoy. He’s terrible at tracking people down, and there’s no way he wasn’t noticed. But the one thing we do know is that they’re on the move, so I’m going to go the opposite direction of Hiroshi. I need to wait for his next update and then get the trio ready.”

Junko nodded, but she said to herself that there was no way she could ever beat the student council president at anything.

○

Lily’s guess was right. Kei and The One were watching Rubbers race out of the capital city center, with Hiroshi in hot pursuit.

“Alright, our idiot pursuer is following the rubber man.”

There were people around them, so The One was communicating telepathically. They were in the government district, in late afternoon. Kei and The One looked like a handsome young boy taking his big dog for a walk.

“Even when he’s not in rubber form, he’s still a giant skinhead,” Kei laughed.

“Rubbers seems to know the kid, anyway.”

“Probably from the war at the school. I don’t know the details,

though. But I don't like the kid in the Brave Suit. He's probably met Kento." For a single instant Kei's smile vanished, as he glared coldly at the rapidly-fading Hiroshi.

"Did USD say something?" The One asked.

"We met yesterday. I was able to talk to him for a while, but nothing much had changed. He doesn't suspect me at all."

"Did he say anything about the Faceless Power?"

"Nothing more than what you said," Kei replied. "It's a power we need more than anything. That's all."

"I see. So, are you ready?" The One said suddenly.

"Stop asking that. I'm fine." Kei laughed again, as the two of them entered a nearby building.

○

"Dey thought dey outsmarted us, but we outsmarted 'em instead!" Michie Ootake laughed to herself on top of a nearby building. She was one of the student council trio. Her specialty was the use of small mechanical bats, which made her great at pursuit missions.

"I'm curious about that building, though," Yoshie said. She hadn't seemed to have heard Michie at all. She lifted the goggles she was using as binoculars, and turned to the small Liradan at her side, Keisu.

"Keisu, you remember anything?"

"I'm afraid not. You know I'm not the type who remembers anything."

It was not just humility. Keisu was the rare Liradan who was an idiot, to the point where she was inferior even to a human. With her old clothes and manner of speech, she was practically the first Liradan.

"That's right. Now, how shall we pursue them?" Yoshie asked Michie.

Yoshie and Keisu were working with the trio. Yoshie had built a new type of mana canceler using her analysis of Keisu's abilities. Keisu's body was unable to be detected by the modern system of the gods. Yoshie had used this to create a field around her that would shield them from the gods' detection. While Hiroshi was attracting C-MID8's attention, they'd used it to hide themselves completely from their eyes.


焼肉食べ

“I dun think we can get inside da building... I’ll contact Arnoul and Kanna...” She sent an encoded message to Arnoul and Kanna Kamiyama, the other two members of the student council trio, who’d already gone on ahead. But the answer that came back was a negative one.

“We can’t follow them anymore, gyah. But we saw them get into the elevator, and there’s only two sub-basements, so we’ll just have to look at how far down they went...”

But her next words were surprising.

“The elevator light went out on sub basement 2 and didn’t come back, gyah.”

“So there’s basements below it...” Yoshie put a hand to her forehead in thought, as if she had some idea what might be down there.

And then she clapped her hands together in surprise, and immediately sent a telepathic message. Its target was Fujiko.

“Hey, Eto, do you remember that set of coordinates?”

○

“Alright... I’ll talk to the student council president. Until then, don’t do anything reckless,” Fujiko said. Her voice was calm, but inside her blood felt like it was about to boil over. The only reason she didn’t do anything immediately was that her self-preservation instincts had won out over her rage. She went to the student council room, and skipped all the introductions, assuming that Lily had already heard it from the trio.

“It would take too long to explain.”

“Everything they told me, they heard from Yoshie Kita, and she doesn’t make any damn sense. So what’s the deal? I understand that there’s something down there in the basement of that building,” Lily asked. Fujiko spoke in hushed tones, even though nobody was listening.

“That building’s basement. I figured out what it is when I investigated the coordinates. Only Keena Soga and I went there, so nobody remembers it, but that’s the spot where we did the ritual of the Demon King’s rebirth.”

“I remember that...” Lily said, astonished. “Rebirth... I only heard about it, I didn’t see for myself, but that’s when he became a real Demon King, right?’

“Yes, that’s right. I’m the one who put him into the device,” Fujiko sounded slightly proud.

“But then... don’t tell me that they’re...” For once, Lily looked a little uneasy.

Fujiko nodded.

“They’re trying to give birth to a new Demon King.”

“But Akuto Sai was born somewhere else right? Probably, at least. So why go there...?”

“When a human is born to be a Demon King, like Akuto Sai, they’re first born as a child. It’s possible that only one person like that can exist at a time.”

“Then that means there’s no way at all a normal person can become a demon king,” Lily said, as if trying to make herself feel better, but Fujiko shook her head.

“I feel like an idiot, being proud of something embarrassing I did, but you remember when Akuto fought here at the academy, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Back then, I was cultivating his cells to create a wave that could control the demon beasts. And that rubber man stole them.”

“That guy they call Rubbers, huh? Akuto’s not so stupid as to allow anybody to cultivate his cells now, but maybe he was before. So you’re telling me there’s a chance they might use those cells to turn a normal person into a demon king?”

Lily stood up.

“We know the coordinates, so let’s teleport there. If we do it from inside the school, we can use the school’s budget to fund it.”

Fujiko shrugged.

“I guess we don’t have a choice.”

○

“Come back, you say? They already know we’re following them?” Hiroshi said into his communicator, astonished. He’d already spent a decent amount of time tracking his foe. By the time he’d gotten the message, he’d left the city’s downtown and entered a section that was full of buildings still under construction. He was starting to wonder what he was doing there. He looked again at the skinhead he’d been chasing. The man turned around. The skinhead’s skin began to turn black, as it took on the consistency of rubber. By the time he was looking at Hiroshi’s face, his own was completely flat and featureless. It was Rubbers. The man he’d seen before.

“So I was tricked,” Hiroshi whispered, but surprisingly, Rubbers answered.

“That’s right.” The fat man spoke, and then his right arm shot out. Hiroshi realized he couldn’t dodge, so he simply whispered “Brave.”

The field that appeared when the suit teleported in blocked the arm.

Maybe he didn’t feel any pain, because despite the loud noise as the arm was smacked away, Rubbers just grinned.

“It feels a little different when a man does it, compared to a

woman. Of course, a woman is better." Hiroshi narrowed his eyebrows. His voice was different from usual. It sounded perverted.

"You say some weird stuff. I don't have time to deal with you. Go play with yourself if you want to have fun."

They were in a construction site, and work had finished for the day. There was nobody there to see them. Hiroshi tried to use the power of his suit to fly upwards.

"Hey! The one thing they told me was that I had to buy time!"

Rubbers reached out another hand to grab Hiroshi's leg.

"Tch!"

Hiroshi gave up on climbing, and gripped the high-frequency blade in his right arm, instead. Rubbers let go and pulled his hand back.

"'Cause you know you can't beat me in a straight up fight?" Hiroshi said, mockingly. But Rubbers seemed unbothered.

"I know that. Nobody's dumb enough to go head-on against a guy holding a mana canceler."

Hiroshi glared as he quickly began to advance on Rubbers.

"Then I guess I'll have to make the first move, won't I?"

But Rubbers was unafraid of Brave's charge.

"That's fine. I'll just run." Rubbers quickly hid himself inside a nearby half-finished building. "I'm faster than you..."

Hiroshi accelerated, but he stopped when he saw that the space Rubbers had entered was too small for a normal human to enter. Rubbers had slid himself between the floor and ceiling of the partially constructed building, where the air conditioning would eventually go.

"Damn rubberman!"

"I know what that suit's flaws are. And what your usual combat patterns are, too." Rubbers' voice echoed throughout the half-finished building.

"So what? You don't seem to have the field that can shut out the suit's energy, or shut down the suit itself."

The former empress, Kazuko, had used a special field to neutralize the overwhelming anti-magic combat power of Brave's suit. By surrounding the area with a VPS field, she could shut off the transfer of energy to it. But only mages of Kazuko or Akuto's level were capable of such a feat.

Brave's suit, however, was a gift from Boichiro Yamato. Which meant that anyone who knew the code could shut it down from the outside. Right now, USD was the only one known to have that code. And he wasn't here. Which meant there was no way he was going to lose to Rubbers.

"I told you, my goal is to buy time. You can't destroy the building. You're a hero, after all. So all I have to do is keep you busy."

"...Why is USD having you attack me while letting me keep the suit?" Hiroshi said, confused by the apparent contradiction.

"Who the hell knows what USD is thinking. This thing has nothing to do with USD, anyway." Rubbers' answer only confused him further.

"What did you say?"

"As you guessed, the plan is underway. The plan itself is something USD started. But we've moved it up a bit. And that's got nothing to do with USD."

"What are you planning on doing?"

"Of course I'm not going to tell you! Don't you understand? As long as you're wearing that suit, you're nothing but a pawn on USD's chessboard. You're a part of his game. That's the only reason I'm bothering to say anything in the first place!"

He was trying to confuse Hiroshi, or maybe just enjoyed tormenting others. Either way, it was clear that there was no point in talking to him. But it was also clear that Rubbers was telling the truth.

"There's no need for you to tell me that. I know it already." Hiroshi said, and tried to end the conversation, but Rubbers was persistent.

"No way. I don't understand why Boichiro Yamato chose a guy like you. No, I don't even know what he was trying to get you to do. You've got no grand dreams. No philosophy. No noble lineage. No special powers. Your one attractive trait is that you're easily moved by what others say. In other words, you're easily manipulated by a certain type of person."

"...Shut up!"

Hiroshi swung the high-frequency blade to chop off Rubbers arm as it attacked, but at the same time, he forgot to activate the mana canceler. The blade couldn't pierce the rubber arm, and instead just dug into it and made it twist.

"Let me give you a tip from a veteran fighter. Don't rush things." Rubbers laughed at Hiroshi's mistake.

"Tch..."

Hiroshi began to think of a way of to get out of here, but when he moved to retreat, an arm came from the direction he was fleeing in.

"...Damn it!"

Now he was mad. But not only could he not easily escape, everything Rubbers was saying was right on the mark.



○

“You guys meet up with Hiroshi,” Lily said to the trio. The five of them (including Keisu and Yoshie) were surprised, but they gave an affirmative.

“So it’s just us two?” Fujiko asked Lily. The two of them were in the area below the school that served as the Demon King’s castle. Akuto had stopped coming down here ever since Peterhausen was gone. Part of the reason was that Fujiko had remodeled the place into some kind of horror show.

“Do you not like that?’

“Of course not. We’re going somewhere dangerous. It feels like you’re trying to keep the trio out of danger.”

“That’s right. Well, Hiroshi is probably in danger too, so it’s not that bad of an idea. But I’ll be the one doing most of the work, so it’s fine, right? You’re pretty good at running, so if it gets dangerous you can just scram. But you’re the one who knows more about the Demon King.”

“...Fine, let’s go then.” Fujiko went inside the teleportation circle, and after waiting for Lily to follow, put in the coordinates. The circle began to glow as the scenery around them changed. Fujiko had seen it before, but Lily hadn’t. She gasped in surprise.

“It’s huge... So this whole space is underground?”

The ceiling was incredibly high for an underground space. Pillars the size of buildings were standing some distance apart from each other, visible in the faint light. It was impossible to tell how far the pillars stretched. It was easily larger than a soccer field.

“It’s big, but since we know the coordinates, our goal is right in front of us,” Fujiko said.

“Yeah, so it seems.”

Lily was looking right in front of them. A huge tube was stretching down from above. It was attached to the coffin that Akuto had once used. Before, there had simply been a coffin in the empty space, but it seemed to have been modified in a short time. Different types of new machines were attached to it. The tube, for instance, hadn’t been there before. It was probably an extension of an elevator. In front of the coffin was a long-haired dog, sitting as if to guard it.

“A dog?” Fujiko said, confused.

The trio had said that there was a dog. But they didn’t expect to find it in front of the coffin.

“You should be careful. There’s something strange about his eyes.”

“His eyes? I can’t see them. He’s too hairy.” Fujiko said, and Lily gritted her teeth.

“That’s not what I meant. Some things you can see if you just

change the way you look, a little."

She immediately stretched out a fist to punch the dog. But only Fujiko was surprised by this.

"What...?!"

"Hah. I'm telling you, it's no ordinary dog."

But Lily's fist came to a stop right in front of the dog's face. A mana shield was formed there.

"I see. So it's not just an ordinary dog, huh?" Fujiko backed away.

"Hmph. C-MID8's just full of surprising weirdos, huh? This one's not even human."

Lily's insult was met with a response.

"You're a nasty little girl. I can tell you grew up somewhere poor."

The dog spoke. Fujiko couldn't believe it, but Lily seemed unsurprised by a talking dog. She seemed more angry about being called "little."

"And who the hell knows what bitch sired you! I'm gonna chop you up and turn you into dog stew, and then throw you out without even eating you!"

Lily charged towards the dog.

"My heritage is a rather complex subject. But my code name is The One. And you're about to find out how it feels to be killed by a furry animal!"

He said as he blocked Lily's charge head-on. Lily's specialty was physical combat, and he'd matched her not with magic, but with his canine body.

"Orryaaah!" Lily howled, and the dog howled back. A moment later, Lily gasped in surprise. Her punches were being matched blow for blow by the dogs front paws.

"What...?"

The dog had stood up on its hind legs, and was swiftly flailing its front legs about like an animal playing with its master. But it was Lily who was being played with.

"You bastard..."

Lily paused her attack and took a step back. The One took a breath and bared his fangs.

"I'm not trying to insult you. This is my body, and this is just how I have to fight."

"I appreciate your concern." Lily said, and she glanced towards Fujiko. Fujiko knew what she meant. They hadn't come here to fight a dog.

"Alright, let's continue."

Lily charged the dog again. The One took her head on, just like before. A fierce battle of fists and paws commenced, but it was Fujiko who moved. She didn't join the strange battle against the dog. Instead,

she moved around to the side, a good distance away from The One, and started to run.

"This was our goal the whole time. If I can just have her stop the Demon King Transformation...!"

"I knew you'd do that. And I do wish you'd think about what it means that I was sent to guard it alone, even if this is a secret mission," The One whispered, and without much concentration created a mana barrier between Fujiko and the coffin.

"We knew you'd do that, too! I can break through it..." Fujiko reached out to deploy her own mana. Normally, the further away mana was from your body, the weaker it got.

Thus, even if he created a field of concentrated mana without much concentration, if a mage touched it directly it would be easy to break. But Fujiko's hand failed to destroy the shield.

"...Impossible!"

Fujiko was blocked by a translucent blue shield, just a few steps away from the coffin.

"Why can't you break a simple barrier?" Lily screamed, but Fujiko was wondering that herself.

"I don't know! It feels like it's made... differently, somehow! I should be able to at least dissolve a little!"

"I've woven the mana in a way difficult for humans to notice. You'll never dissolve it the normal way."

"Are you really a dog?" Lily shouted, and tried to break past The One, but he used his dog speed to get in front of her. She had no choice but to continue the battle.

"It doesn't matter to you who I am. Now, it's time. If Kei Sakura, the boy inside, isn't dead."

Just as his sentence finished, Fujiko began to see a replay of the same thing she'd seen last time. Light and steam poured out from a small gap in the coffin. The only thing different was the person inside.

"Oh...!"

At this point, Fujiko knew it was too late. All they could do was watch the unknown person inside rise. The coffin opened completely, and someone came out. Their movements were elegant and seductive, completely out of place for the room they were in.

"What...?"

Fujiko was, for a moment, entranced, and stopped trying to break through the barrier. The boy's neck stretched upwards as his long hair spread out like a butterfly's wings. It was like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. Akuto's rebirth had been filled with strength and awe-inducing horror, but this seemed like the birth of a beautiful demon.

"I didn't think a human could survive that... but I guess one did," The One said, a cruel smile on his doggy face.

“He can’t be...” Lily stopped punching and fell back, worried by what she saw.

“He... awoke?” Fujiko whispered.

As if in answer, the new Demon King spread his hands up towards a sky he couldn’t see.

“This is... amazing. I can see them. I can see everybody’s records.”

Kei wasn’t wearing clothes. That was how Fujiko, who’d assumed he was a woman, knew she was wrong. But still she couldn’t look away. There was indeed a certain beauty in his movements.

“So this is the power of the Demon King? I can use all resources. In a way, I can use the whole world.” Kei raised a hand, and clothes came down and wrapped themselves around him.

“Even I don’t know if I teleported them here or created them.”

And then he turned to look at Fujiko. Fujiko shivered, but she couldn’t move a muscle. Kei smiled softly.

“You’re the one who prepared the Demon King’s cells for me, aren’t you?”

There was nothing she could say.

“W-What... what if I was?”

“Part of the man you love is inside me now, so I wanted to ask if you loved me too.”

Fujiko was shocked by the innocence in his voice.

“I-I don’t know...”

“I see. We’ve just met, after all. But that’s not quite right. I can tell. You won’t fall in love with me. You just thought I was pretty, didn’t you? People who look at me that way never feel like they understand me.”

Kei turned away to gaze at the surroundings, as if her answer didn’t matter to him. His eyes were strangely clear.

“I thought that if I could look at the data for everyone in the empire, I might find somebody like me. And then I might find someone who understood me, at least a little. But this is amazing. There wasn’t anyone. I’m here, all alone. Like I’m alone underneath an endless blue sky. It feels good, but also a little worrying. This is what it’s like to see everything, huh?”

Kei spoke sadly, with a face like a beautiful girl’s. But in the next moment, he waved his hand, and his face changed. A typhoon began to blow.

“Hyaah!”

“Tch!”

Fujiko and Lily tried their best to stay standing, but they were blown backwards in an instant. Fortunately, the space was so huge there were no walls for them to slam into. They were able to land on their feet, without taking much damage. If there were walls, they

would've been slammed into them and badly hurt.

"This isn't quite right. I was hoping you'd be stronger," Kei said, disappointed, as he looked from Lily to Fujiko.

"Sorry we're not," Lily said, and began to walk towards Kei with long strides. Kei seemed surprised for a moment, before snapping his fingers as if he noticed something.

"Oh, no, that's not it. I was thinking I'd feel some kind of recoil. Like, I'd fire it off and then feel a little rumble, or something."

"You mean we're not even worth your real power?" Lily spat.

But there was nothing else she could do. She couldn't even walk another step. Kei was looking at her with cold eyes. That was the only reason. And then, for some reason he began to speak to her.

"Murder has a deep meaning. I learned that after I became Demon King. In other words, I just learned it right now. You see, if you kill someone, that means stealing away all the possibilities they had. Kei's eyes were shining like a child's at this newly discovered concept.

"So... what? That's obvious," Lily said, unsure of what he was getting at, when he nodded.

"That's right. It's obvious. But nobody thinks of it the other way around. It means it's okay to kill somebody who might steal other people's possibilities, or who has no possibilities at all." Kei's expression was bright.

"So you realized that by looking at lots of people's logs?" Lily asked. "Do you think you're god?" Her words were bitter. Kei, however, seemed unmoved by her words.

"God? Perhaps the devil would be a better term. But no matter. Anyway, I don't want to kill you, and that's why. You've got nothing to do with the job I have to do. You could say, in other words, that I've discovered who I can kill and who I can't. Like a real god could, you see," he said in a leisurely tone.

"And what is your job?

"It's... See? Look. It's already begun. I have to protect this place from them." Kei looked up at the sky. He seemed to have sensed something.

"What's begun?" Lily asked, but Kei's reply was short.

"You'll know soon," he said, as he grabbed The One. And then he stepped off the ground and flew upwards. Neither Fujiko nor Lily could do anything. When they fought Kazuko, at least she was human. But this time was different.

"Are we just going to let him go?"

"This is the first time I've ever fought someone who I didn't even think I could resist..."

Fujiko and Lily whispered to each other.

"That's right. You've never seen Akuto fight when he was serious."

“Maybe I’ll be less of an ass to Sai Akuto when I meet him next time... But it looks like somebody’s arrived who can help us.” Lily looked up and grinned. As Kei and The One ascended, an opening was forming in the ceiling far above them.

“Something’s coming from above...?” Fujiko whispered.

“That’s why I sent the trio that way. If I’d known we were up against a Demon King I could’ve used him better than I did. I’m just glad he made it in time.” Lily grinned.

The roof began to crumble, as if that was a signal. Someone jumped down through the opening. It was Brave.

“Him. Shoot him down!” Lily screamed. Either Hiroshi heard her, or the suit detected a Demon King, because Hiroshi headed straight for Kei. Kei tossed The One into the air and prepared to defend himself. The One stopped in mid-air under his own power. Hiroshi charged towards the unmoving Kei. But just when they were about to collide...

Hiroshi’s body suddenly lost power and began to descend.

“Huh... Wait...”

“Oh dear...”

Lily and Fujiko both were stunned. Hiroshi wasn’t wearing his suit. He was just a boy in casual clothing, falling head-first towards the ground.

“What is he doing...?”

Lily stretched out an arm to grab him. Hiroshi knew how to use flying magic, so he was probably just so astonished he forgot to. The problem was what had astonished him.

“Look...” Fujiko said, poking Lily as she turned around and looked uneasily behind them. A summoning circle had formed, and somebody was coming out of it.

“Tch. There’s somebody else?” Lily groaned, but it was Hiroshi who reacted first.

“Then that’s USD...?”

Indeed. It was USD — Kento — who emerged from the circle.

“I disabled the suit,” he said, in a voice so calm it was infuriating.

“So you were waiting the whole time?” Lily said angrily, but Kento’s reaction wasn’t what she expected. He was looking up at Kei, with a mixture of scrutiny and concern.

“Why did you do this without my permission?” Kento said to him.

There was a unique atmosphere in between the two. Despite the distance between them, both Lily and Fujiko could feel it.

“I don’t need your permission, do I?” Kei said, disappointed, as he looked from Lily to Fujiko.

“I didn’t know if your body could survive the process. That’s why I delayed this.”

“But I was fine. I was right to try.”

“That’s not the issue. If we lost you, the plan would become impossible.” His voice was impossibly calm, but the words that came back from Kei were terribly cruel.

“But it all worked out, didn’t it? Which means from now on, it’s my plan. If you’re here, you’ve realized that it’s already begun, right? So I’m going to follow the plan.”

His voice seemed filled with irritation. He turned around, grabbed The One, and flew out through the hole Hiroshi had made.

“Well, that’s a problem...” Kento said as he watched him go. He shrugged, like it wasn’t much of a problem at all.

“It feels like we just had to watch a lover’s quarrel.” Lily sighed, but her face was filled with anger.

“We need to get an actual explanation as to what’s going on here,” Fujiko said, looking coldly at Kento.

“The plan to create a Demon King in the post-birth phase has been around ever since Rubbers stole Akuto Sai’s cells. But for a while, we abandoned it due to a lack of data. This plan was mine.” It was odd how friendly he was being, but Lily decided to ask a question.

“Then what does it mean, that the plan’s already begun? Is the plan so important it needs the power of a Demon King?”

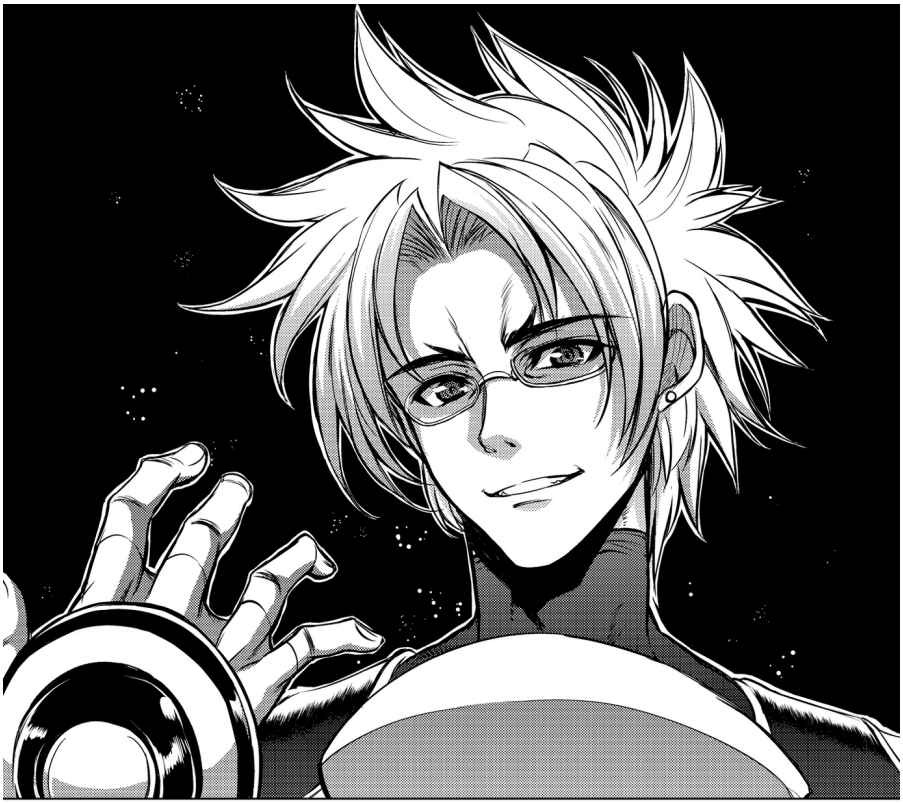
“It’s a war,” Kento said.

“A war?” Fujiko said, suspiciously. War, for the Empire, meant nothing more important than what Akuto had once done. There were no countries on earth strong enough to challenge the empire. Which meant that war was something the Demon King caused. Creating a Demon King to fight a war made no sense. However, Kento continued.

“There’s a country that will declare war on the empire. No, one that will be reluctantly forced to.”

“What the hell’s going on? How many surprises are we in store for today?”

Lily shook her head.





○

“As a member of the Hattori clan, I’d like to think you’re ready for this, but...” It was Yozo Hattori who spoke. He was the leader of the Hattori clan and Junko’s father. And also the high priest in charge of rebuilding the god Suhara. He was speaking in a tatami room in the Hattori’s mansion. Junko and Yuko were sitting in front of him. They were all in their ordinary clothes, but there was a dignity in the air that made it clear that this was no dinnertime conversation, but a meeting of the Hattori, the clan tasked with the nation’s defense.

“We are,” Junko said.

“We are prepared to not sully the family name,” Yuko said.

They were facing a war like none the Empire had seen before. Of course, even at his age, Yozo had never experienced it. He was maintaining a dignified air, but he didn’t know much more than Junko did. It had nothing to do with the god Suhara’s disappearance, but the priests of Suhara were being kept away from the developing situation. The three of them were watching a news broadcast on a mana screen.

“An undersea nation that split off from the Empire over a 1000 years ago has now named itself the rightful heir to the empire, and has made contact with the government.”

“The Cabinet is negotiating with them, but they believe there is a possibility that the kingdom took action to harm towards the Empress, who is currently vacationing to the south, and is taking a strong stance.

“The Empress’s whereabouts remain unknown, and her safety is a matter of national concern. It’s believed likely that the undersea kingdom may have harmed her. Their king insists that he is heir to the throne, which is being taken as casting doubt on the legitimacy of the Empress...”

The screen showed several ships, which were different from imperial designs. From their cylindrical shape, they almost certainly had undersea capability. These were no doubt the ships that were sent by the undersea kingdom.

“It’s a fact that word came in from the Liradans in the patrol fleet. And it’s also true that the empress is missing. But all that information was being kept hidden. From us, that is,” Yozo said.

The Hattori clan also conducted its own intelligence activities as part of its duty protecting the country. Information warfare was a speciality of theirs. But something was wrong this time. Information the cabinet shouldn’t be publicizing, was being publicized.

“If this information goes public, it means war, right Father?” Yuko asked. Her experience as an idol made her sensitive to this sort of

thing. Yozo nodded.

"Even if the cabinet is manipulating the people, we still need to follow the people's will."

"It's just like being an idol," Yuko said, and laughed.

Yozo scolded her for her attitude, but he was smiling, happy that he'd gotten his point across. Junko didn't seem to agree.

"I'm ready for this, but I believe that if the people are wrong, it's our job to correct them,."

"Junko," Yozo began, a sternness in his voice, "It's not our job to decide what's right. If we think about whether something is right or not, we won't be able to protect anybody. That's just how it works."

"But..."

"We fight for the people who do not. We kill for the sake of others. That's why it's wrong for us to decide who it is right to kill."

"I understand that, as a concept, at least. But somebody is controlling the information that's getting out. And we know essentially who that person is." Junko began to speak more confidently. But Yozo still shook his head.

"We just have to believe that the people will make the right choice. No matter how many times we've been betrayed in the past, it's all we can do. I know that the people are capable of it."

"If only Keena and Akuto came back..." Junko whispered.

"It's fine to trust them, but you should work to become someone that they can trust. That's how you must live your life," Yozo said. And then, one of the Hattori ninja knelt behind the sliding doors of the room. Yozo sensed his presence and asked what he wanted. An answer came.

"A report has come in from our naval patrols. Someone is ignoring our warnings and approaching the target."

"Who is 'someone'?" Yozo asked, impatiently. There was a tension in the voice that answered.

"It's one man."

"What?"

"Yes. One man appeared above the sea and is approaching the target.

"Someone would do that?"

"It's unbelievable, but true. And the reports say that it's a Demon King."

"A Demon King?" Yuko and Junko looked towards the ninja.

"Yes. However, it's not Akuto Sai. But its aura and mana level have the same power as a Demon King."

Junko looked confused when she heard the ninja's words.

—What's going on here?

○

“An undersea nation?” Lily frowned, but when she saw the news on the mana screen Fujiko displayed, she nodded, satisfied. Lily, Fujiko, Hiroshi, and Kento were still underground. More precisely, Kento had stopped them from leaving.

“They call themselves the Republic. But they’re a feudal nation, with a king. In that sense, they’re rather unique.” Kento began to explain.

“So they’re organized similar to the Empire?” Lily asked. Kento nodded.

“But their values are quite different than ours. They have a magical civilization, but it has its own god, who places no restrictions on the use of magic.”

That surprised Fujiko.

“Isn’t that what we Black Mages have always dreamed of?”

“It would be, yes. But that’s not the issue. No, it’s possible that our differing values may cause an issue in the future. That country’s king is aboard the ships. What he thinks of us is going to affect things going forward.”

Kento’s explanation seemed rather roundabout, but Lily knew why that was.

“I see. So the King’s come in response to the Jeweled Branch?”

“That’s right. It’s the only thing that could’ve brought him up here. And it’s the only thing he could want.”

“You mean he wants the Branch, or the Empire itself?” Lily said, lost in thought.

“He’s likely after the Faceless Power that the Jeweled Branch can give him. He’s never made contact with us before, so that can only be why. But that’s all C-MID8 was able to learn when we made contact with him earlier.”

“So you had made contact with him earlier,” Lily said, glaring at him. Kento ignored her stare.

“Of course. But at that point, he was friendly, which is why didn’t bother researching further. He wanted to participate in the selection of the next ruler fairly.”

“What’s the problem with that? Why not let him?” Fujiko asked. Kento shrugged.

“It’s sad to say, but people who take that attitude are never trusted. The priests of the god Mowpha, who handle relationships with foreign countries, remained consistently on guard.”

“It would’ve been different if they could’ve just come busting in like Nonimora,” Lily said. Kento’s face took on an odd expression.

“That’s true. But the fact that Nonimora possessed secrets relating

to the Jeweled Branch and the Faceless Power were a major factor. In other words, what this country probably hopes to do is steal something from the Marlay.

"That would explain things, but what exactly is the Faceless Power?"

"We're at the point where we can only make guesses. It has to do with what The One is planning right now, too."

"Why would that pretty boy want to be Demon King, anyway? That's The One's doing, right?"

"The One is deceiving all of them."

"Then why did you disable the suit?" Lily said as she turned to Hiroshi.

"Of course, because nothing will come of killing them," was Kento's answer. And then he walked over to Hiroshi.

"But I do want to ask for your help."

"My help?" Hiroshi looked upset. Kento ignored him and continued.

"Correct. You're the only one who can fight the Demon King. I want you to stop The One's plot."

Hiroshi didn't answer, but Lily spoke instead.

"That tells us nothing. What is this plot?"

"Probably, in the end, the annihilation of humanity," Kento said, calmly.

For a moment, everyone fell silent in confusion. Lily finally opened her mouth, but now all the sarcasm was gone.

"Annihilation, huh? That's going a bit far, isn't it?"

But Kento crossed his arms and shook his head, as if to say it was the truth and there was nothing he could do about it.

"The One isn't human. He's a survivor from a species from another dimension, or, put simpler, an alien."

"What."

"Oh my..."

Both Lily and Fujiko seemed like they couldn't believe it

"It's understandable if you don't believe me. But the Faceless Power probably came from somewhere that we couldn't detect. The plan was to get the Jeweled Branch that acts as its key, and then get the power itself. And only someone who has the blood of the imperial family can use it."

"Then shouldn't they just have gone after Nonimora?" Lily asked, and then she realized.

"...No, that's right. She's protecting it." Kento nodded.

"That's why instead of talking to the Marlay, they waited for the Republic to make contact with us. That was my plan, at the beginning."

“Plan?”

“My plan for us to get the Faceless Power. As long as things were resolved peacefully, Akuto wouldn’t intervene. As long as it was the people’s decision, you see. In other words, if we came to terms with the Republic and were able to reach an agreement. But we were ready for war as well. The Republic’s system of government has the potential to shake the empire to its very foundation.”

“I see. So the King’s come in response to the Jeweled Branch? And The One is trying to start that war, then.”

“Correct. He was thinking that if he could kidnap their king, the number of casualties would be small.”

“It’s an evil plan, but an effective one,” Lily said, with bared teeth.

“So right now they’re censoring any infromation on the truth, while the Demon King and Republic ships are facing off, huh?” Fujiko looked exasperated.

“Correct. That’s why I want you to stop the new Demon King. That’s the surest way to save the Empire.” Kento offered a hand to Hiroshi. Hiroshi looked up at Kento, before averting a single eye like a pouting child.

“Knowing you, you’ve already got a plan for if I refuse, right?”

Kento’s eyes narrowed, as if to say, “You get it.”

“Of course. But I’m counting on your conscience to choose the right path.”

“Conscience? Bullshit. You just think you can use me to do whatever you want.” Hiroshi shook his head. He turned his back to Kento.

“That’s part of it, yes. But the fact remains that you don’t have a choice.” Kento said, but Hiroshi didn’t turn around.

“I’m out. I’m not doing what you want me to.” Lily followed after him as he began to leave.

“Well, I abuse him too. So his tantrum’s partially my fault. But I don’t think I want to get involved, either. I want to fight you, but your attitude is killing the mood.” Fujiko sighed and left, as well.

“After hearing what you said, I have my own thing that I want to do. You seem to have a lot of hidden plans and secrets. You should know that it’s only women who become more attractive by hiding things and lying about how they feel,” Hiroshi entered the teleportation circle, leaving behind Kento, who seemed not at all shocked. Lily stepped in it too, but turned around at the last second.

“Oh, right. You have one thing wrong.”

“What’s that?” Kento asked. Lily grinned.

“He’s been a real hero for a while now,” Lily said, as she and Fujiko disappeared into the circle, and at last Kento was alone.

○

—*Maybe I am just being a child.* Hiroshi thought to himself as he sat down on a bench. With the help of Yoshie and the Trio, he'd been able to escape, but the words Rubbers said to him were still stuck in his heart.

—*It's true that I don't have any kind of ideals, so what he's saying is true. That's why I just do whatever the President tells me to.*

"What's wrong? You look out of it." The sudden voice startled Hiroshi out of his reverie.

"H-Hi!"

It was Yuko. She was laughing.

"Hahaha. What are you doing, silly?"

She was wearing a hat and glasses, and looked different than usual. Nobody in the park recognized her.

"I was just thinking," Hiroshi said as he sat down on a bench. Yuko took his hand and started to walk.

"Well, think later. Yuko the idol personally made you a lunch!"

The two of them looked for a spot to eat in the park. Normally the mana screens in the park showed peaceful scenes, but today they were showing news programs with chryons. The standoff with the Republic ships was continuing. The news was saying that a clash was unavoidable.

Hiroshi and Yuko both knew the truth, and were praying that nothing happened, but the public was leaning towards demanding the Republic ship's destruction. Both hawks and doves agreed that the battle would be easy, and would only be a small conflict. Of course, that would mean work for Yuko too. This would probably be her last break for a long time. And she'd chosen to spend it with Hiroshi.

"Let's eat over there," Yuko said, and then laid down a blanket on top of a small grassy knoll.

"I put a new type of flavoring I got from a sponsor on the rice..."

"You're pushing a lot of rice flavorings lately, aren't you?" Hiroshi said. The two of them began to eat, but at times there was an awkwardness between them.

"The Republic is meaningless in the face of the Empire's righteousness...!"

A group had deployed a big mana screen in the park and was broadcasting a speech. Passerby were giving it a moment's notice before returning to their walk. Nobody was listening, but nobody was telling them to stop, either. Small groups of two or three people were chatting in a low voice. Nobody seemed to want to let people know what they were thinking.

"Want to sit somewhere else?"

"It's gonna be the same no matter where we go."

"The town's not a happy place right now."

"Yeah... not after what happened."

"You're acting weird too, Hiroshi! You've got the famous Yuri Hoshino next to you, so cheer up!" Yuko poked him in the cheek.

Hiroshi smiled, but his smile was forced.

"I'm just worried, is all."

"Worried? Don't worry, I'm not going to the front lines."

"No, I'm not worried about you."

"Huh? That's kind of mean, isn't it?"

"No, I just mean that even if you did go to the front lines, I'd protect you myself. I wouldn't have to worry then."

"Ooh, you're so cool." Yuko laughed. But there was still a grimness to his smile.

"So are you worried about something else, then?"

"Hmm, yeah, I suppose I am."

"You're so indecisive. That's not the Hiroshi I thought was cool," Yuko said, and cheerfully leaned her head on his shoulder. Hiroshi's heart began to pound as her face was shockingly close to his, and he mustered up the courage to speak.

"Um... Yuko, if you were being forced to do something big you thought you couldn't do, or something you didn't want to do, what would you do?" He began.

The answer came faster than he expected.

"Huh? I'd refuse."

"S-Sure, but what if the reason you didn't want to do the thing they were telling you to do was that you really didn't have anything that you wanted to do, but the thing that you had to do was something that was really important, and so you didn't think it had to be you that did it..."

Hiroshi didn't even know what he was saying anymore, but Yuko must have understood, because she cut him off.

"Oh, you mean work, right? My job is weirder than most people's, so I understand that. They make me wear weird clothes, which I don't like, but there's so many staff around me that it feels like I can't turn them down. If you refuse, they say you think you're too good for it and want to be an artist, and you get less work, you know? If you really do want to be an artist, you can get by anyway, but that's only if you have something you really want and are really aggressive about it."

What Yuko was saying had nothing to do with Hiroshi's problem, but it made a strange sort of sense to him.

"Yeah. That's how it is. It feels like I'm being forced to fight, basically," Hiroshi said. "But everybody around me has their own

plans, and they're trying to use me for them... That's what it's like."

"From my experience, that's..." Yuko paused for a moment and held up a finger.

"That's?"

Hiroshi leaned forward and waited for her answer.

"That's... something you'll just have to give up on."

"Huh?"

Yuko laughed, and Hiroshi didn't know what to say. But she continued.

"It's just like being an idol. Nobody cares about how idols feel. If they found out you're dating a boy, your fans will panic and say they've been betrayed!"

"Haha... That's true, I bet."

"So you just have to give up. It's not me they're talking about, it's Yuri Hoshino. Of course, you can't completely separate the two, so I've had the same worries you have. The Yuri Hoshino everybody loves is a lot more wonderful than I am. But that just means I was unlucky."

"Unlucky?"

"Yeah. I became Yuri Hoshino because I was unlucky. It was pure chance that what I did became popular. It was pure chance that somebody liked my face. All that matters is whether you know it was chance or not," Yuko said, and smiled.

"Then my suit was..."

"Of course. The ultimate in random chance. So maybe somebody will take it away from you, but that's just like me being Yuri Hoshino. Being an idol is something I'm borrowing from my friends. So if it ever gets out that I'm behaving badly, or dating somebody, they'll take it away from me."

"Yeah, that's right..."

"So as long as I'm borrowing it, I'm going to use it how I want."

"But there's nothing I really want to do."

"Hmm? Of course there is. You want to protect the people around you, right?" Hiroshi felt like she had seen through him to his very core, and he felt a little sad. He felt like he was a very simple person.

"Well... You're right. I'm a boring person. There's not much more to me."

"That's normal, and there's nothing you can do about it. It's surprisingly common for people who think like you to be given really important jobs. But there are some things that only a person like you can do." Yuko laughed mischievously.

"What is it that only a normal person can do?"

"Bare their emotions. Everybody around you is really concerned with the country, and society, and all those big things, right? When

you're thinking about that, you're not thinking about the feelings right in front of you. So help them remember."

Her words made sense to him. A lot of the people around him seemed to no longer have any emotions of their own at all.

"Yeah, you're right, actually."

"Yeah. So be the hero that you can become. A hero who can express everyone's feelings."

"I see... Maybe you're right. No, you *are* right. There's still things I wanted to do," Hiroshi said, as if talking to himself.

"Heheh. I'm glad I made you feel better. I guess all that idol work paid off," Yuko said proudly.

Just then, an unsettling noise came from her tablet. Her expression changed. Hiroshi sensed something was wrong, and froze.

"Don't tell me..." Yuko stared at the tablet. There was an encrypted message on it.

"It's begun... It's really started."

Yuko looked at Hiroshi nervously.

"The war?" Hiroshi asked, and Yuko shook her head.

"No. Some weird guy appeared in front of the Republic's ships and started attacking, ignoring our orders."

"The new Demon King... Kei Sakura," Hiroshi whispered.

"I'm sorry. I have to go." Yuko stood up. In that instant, the light returned to Hiroshi's eyes.

"Let's go. I'm coming with you."

"Huh?" Yuko looked at him. Hiroshi stood up.

"I can finally see it. The thing I need to do. And the thing I can do." Hiroshi slapped his cheeks to wake himself up. And then he smiled at Yuko.

"You helped me realize it. Thank you, Yuko."

Yuko blushed. It was the first time she'd seen Hiroshi look like that.

"W-Wow, it's like, 'Who is this boy'?"



3 - From the Sky Shall Come Terror

Akuto landed in the jungle. He was holding Keena, and groaning in pain.

“I did my best to do what she said...”

“Haha! You were pretty good at falling on those leaves,” Nonimora laughed at him.

She’d managed to land on the ground without any problems at all, by landing on one large leaf after another, letting the branches lessen the impact of her fall. Akuto had tried his best to copy her, but he was carrying Keena, and their combined weight had broken through the branches and sent them almost straight to the ground. If he hadn’t only just run out of mana after landing, they might’ve been badly hurt.

“You okay, Ackie?” Keena asked. Akuto took a moment to move all his limbs around before he answered.

“Looks like I’m fine. But I can tell that you can’t use mana here. It’s being absorbed by these trees.”

“Then we can’t get out, can we?” she said uneasily, “And I only have the right I brought with me.” But then, Korone came down from above. She’d arrived slower than the others, because she was using a parachute. She landed a short distance away, and then began to walk towards them through the trees, bundling the parachute up as she went.

“It seems we can’t use mana here. I’m running off my internal battery, but combat will be impossible for me. I also can’t use my tools. Like all of you, I can convert food into energy, but I won’t last two weeks.”

“That’s rough. Especially since we need to walk out of here.”

Akuto put his hand to his chin. The situation may have been more serious than he thought. But Nonimora’s voice was happy.

“Don’t worry. You can cross the whole island in a few days. And these trees were modified in the distant past,” Nonimora ran over to and climbed up a nearby tree, and then came down holding what looked like a large ball.

“This fruit is edible. It grows everywhere, so you’ll never run out. And when night comes some of the trees glow in the dark, and also give off water.”

She tossed the ball-shaped fruit to Akuto. It had a hard skin, but there was a thin line like the stitching on a soccer ball running along its almost perfectly spherical form. He lightly tugged on it, and the

skin came off easily, revealing white fruit inside. He looked at Nonimora, and her face seemed to indicate that he was supposed to eat it. He ripped off a chunk. It wasn't particularly juicy, and felt like ripping a sponge. When he tried it, it had a taste and texture somewhere between bread and yam.

"I see. It's pure carbohydrates."

Nonimora nodded, satisfied.

"Yup. The blessings of nature."

"But with all the modifications you've done, I don't think you can call it nature..."

Nonimora pouted, as if she was upset.

"You know what's unnatural? The idea that what humans do isn't nature. Buildings, Liradans, anything that's created is natural as long as it's working in a way that's true to itself." Nonimora gestured toward Korone.

"What's unnatural is to not be true to yourself. Forcing yourself to do things. Going too far. Those are the only things that are unnatural. Taking more than you need to eat. Working when you're tired. Hurting people who've surrendered, or surrendering and going on to get revenge. All those are unnatural. If you're not living naturally you lose sight of the blessings of nature."

"Acting natural is my specialty," Korone said casually.

Akuto sighed, but nodded. He could accept this. And not only that, he wanted to know more. A lot more.

"Does that apply to even something like a theme park?" Nonimora nodded.

"It was made to be a fun place, and it is. So its nature means enjoying living there. A lot of people say we're believing a lie, but what is truth? It's instinctual to want to know what the truth is, but if you take that too far, that becomes unnatural too. Truth is just the things we can learn from science. Whenever you try to think about the truth of anything else, it causes problem somewhere."

Akuto felt like he was being criticized. But Nonimora's words made sense to him. She was probably saying that you needed to be a little flexible in your thinking.

"But a lot of people do believe lies," Akuto said, and Nonimora nodded.

"But even so, if they're living in harmony with nature, people can talk and understand each other. It's unnatural to spend more than a day alone. Whenever there's a problem between people on this island, it's because they spend all their time alone, or force themselves to meet other people."

"You're right," Akuto nodded. Then he heard an upset voice.

"Hey, Ackie, we need to get moving."

It was a bit odd hearing it from Keena, but she was right. He waved a quick hand at Nonimora in apology.

"Sorry to interrupt. But we need to start moving."

"Hmm... No matter where we are, we can just head west. Once we see a big tower, that's the village. We can't get lost."

"Ackie, carry our stuff."

Keena was standing next to a big travel bag that she'd thrown out of the plane when it was crashing. She was calling Akuto's attention to it.

"Alright. By the way, do you have the Jeweled Branch with you?" Akuto asked. Keena took the box holding it out of her own bag, which was slung on her shoulder.

"See? It's fine." But as she put it back in her bag, she let out a small scream.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. A bug just flew past me."

"A bug, huh? Hey, are there bugs here?" It seemed strange to Akuto for insects to be in an artificial jungle.

"It's artificial, but these are living things. Of course, some insects are here to pollinate them. None attack humans though, so don't worry."

"I see."

Keena picked up the bag and wrapped her arm around Akuto's.

"Let's go."

"Yeah, you're right." Akuto nodded, and Keena started to walk forward with him. But since Akuto didn't move, Keena almost tripped forward.

"Hey, Ackie! You need to come with me!" Keena pouted.

"No, Keena, I think that way is east."

"Huh?"

"That's right. The direction with lots of branches growing towards it is east," Nonimora laughed.

"Don't worry. I have an internal compass," Korone said, and pointed in the actual direction of west.

"Hmph. Okay, one more time..." Keena started to walk again

At times like this, Keena was always the one who was most relaxed. Even in a situation like this, she'd sing a song as she went... normally. If she was the normal Keena, that is.

"What's wrong?" Akuto kept asking.

"Nothing," Keena would say. But she kept clinging to his arm. Since she wasn't flying like she usually was, it was hard to walk.

"Shouldn't you get a little further away?" Akuto said. He wasn't annoyed or blushing. It was just really hard to walk. Keena, however, didn't think so.

“Hey, I don’t like it when you talk like that,” Keena said, and looked up at him like she was about to cry.

“What’s gotten into you? Jeez,” Akuto said, but didn’t comment further as they continued walking west. Eventually, they reached a point where they could see a clearly artificial tower beyond the trees. The only tall objects on the island were trees, so the large object made the perfect landmark.

“That’s the tower, right?”

“Yup. It holds the ship that goes to the stars.”

“So that’s where it is, huh? How tall is it?”

“A little under a thousand meters.”

The tower was a cylinder rising straight upwards. The whole thing glowed. It was too far to make out the details, but there was something like a shining jewel on the top.

“So even if we can see it from here, we’re still a long way away. What’s that thing on the top? The one that’s shining.”

“That’s a sign. It changes whenever the Faceless Power is used. The Faceless Power can only use its good power if used by a Good Heart. Otherwise, the Faceless Power will someday destroy the whole species. It lets us know if a good power used it.” Nonimora began climbing up a nearby tree.

“It’ll take 2 days at a slow pace to reach it from here. It’s getting late, so let’s find a tree to sleep in. Something to eat and drink too.”

Given the height of the tower, Nonimora was probably right.

“Alright,” Akuto said, and then asked, “A tree to sleep in?”

“A tree with a shining trunk. And a tree with big leaves. Bring those here,” she said, tossing a few fruits at him. They were all of different sizes, from little to big, and when he’d caught the last one, Nonimora jumped at him too, and landed right on his shoulders.

“I’m amazed you caught everything.”

“Did you think I couldn’t when you threw them? That’s a problem,” Akuto laughed.

“What kind of fruit is this?” Keena asked as she looked over her shoulder at them.

“The little ones are food. The big ones are for you to drink,” Nonimora said, and then started to run a ways off, before turning to look back at them.

“There’s a tree here with a shining trunk. Let’s rest here.”

Akuto followed her and saw a strange tree with a shining trunk. The trunk was straight like a coconut tree, and because it was glowing it looked like a flourescent light stuck into the ground.

“So these are put here so people won’t have problems if they get lost? It feels a little too convenient, honestly.”

“But it means that if too many people live here, it’ll disappear.”

“Does that mean there’s limits on how many kids you can give birth to in your village?” Akuto asked, curious, but Keena pulled his arm to cut the conversation off.

“Forget that. Let’s eat.”

Keena looked surprisingly upset, so Akuto dropped his bag to give her a place to sit, and pulled the skin off a piece of fruit for her.

“Sorry. Were you hungry?”

“That’s not it…”

Keena said, oddly upset. Akuto was starting to worry.

“If something’s bothering you, then tell me.”

“Hmph.” She frowned. And then all she said was, “It doesn’t matter.”

Akuto didn’t know how to react to that.

“…Alright, but if something comes up, tell me,” he said, as nicely as he could. Then he took the large leaves that Nonimora had rolled up and brought them over. They were the size of a futon, and he laid them out to sleep on.

“The sun’s setting. All that’s left today is to eat and go to sleep.”

Nonimora called Keena and Korone over and sat them down.

“You’re probably not used to this, so I’m sure it’s painful, but it’s just one more day. Tonight’s the last night you’ll have to do this. Don’t worry,” Nonimora said.

“I’m fine. Worry about Keena, not me. But you know, if you lived here too long you might not get enough electrolytes. We can’t stay here that long. No, I guess in Keena’s case she’s run out of rice,” Akuto said, and he looked at her. But she was eating with an unreadable expression. When they were done, Nonimora lay down.

“It’s not cold, but if you want, you can use a leaf as a blanket. I’d like to do some Hem-Hem, but we need to conserve our energy,” she said, and then began to snore immediately.

“…That’s amazing. Should we get some sleep too?” Akuto asked, and Keena nodded wordlessly.

“Give me a second,” she said softly, before getting up and leaving. He nodded, assuming she needed to go to the bathroom. Nonimora had told them how to recognize the trees for that.

“By the way,” Korone, who had been almost entirely and eerily silent, suddenly put her face right in front of Akuto’s.

“Uwah. What is it?”

“I can say this now that she’s gone. The Empress seems upset by something.”

“That’s right. If you know what it is, I’d appreciate it if you’d tell me.”

“I do know what it is. It’s you.”

“Is that right?” Akuto was shocked.

“You’re giving Nonimora too much attention,” Korone said.

“Sure, I’m talking to her more right now, but that doesn’t mean…”

“I know you don’t mean anything by it. But please remember that the throne is a heavy burden for the Empress. Right now you’re acting not as a person, but as the Demon King. Of course, that can’t be helped, since that’s closer to your true nature.”

“That’s… fair. But yeah, maybe I’m thinking too ambitiously. Normal people don’t talk about the fate of nations,” Akuto said. He wasn’t sure about it at first, but he’d made his decision.

“That’s right. But for a while, the Empress will have to think about the wider world for a while too. But that wider world may be wider than just one country.”

“The Faceless Power, huh?”

“The empress feels that the power has something to do with her. Of course, she’s worried. She doesn’t gain confidence from having a great power, like you do.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Akuto felt ashamed of himself. It was true that Nonimora had her own philosophy, and a similar, though twisted version of it, lived in Akuto as well. What was more, there was something in the way she thought that he could sympathize with. Something that made him think a revolution was possible in the Empire.

But he realized that he wanted Keena away from all that, too. The girls around Akuto were extraordinary in every way. Keena was no exception, in some ways she was the worst of them all, but she wanted to live as a normal girl.

“…I need to apologize then.”

“Apologizing won’t change anything,” Korone said.

“Then what do I do?”

“It’s simple. Make love to her. Or ‘hem-hem,’ if you prefer the local vernacular.”

“Listen, jokes like that are…’ He cut off and waited for her to respond. But she didn’t answer.

“You’re not joking?”

“I’m serious. Fairly serious.”

“Fairly serious?”

“Well, 90% serious. The remaining 10% is sexual harassment.”

“Listen…”

“But well, what she wants is to have less to worry about. I’m not telling you to stick it in, or anything. She wouldn’t want that anyway.”

“Stick it in…?”

“That choice of words was 90% sexual harassment,” Korone said. “But I do think you should love her. Just hold her in your arms.”

“Hmm… Well, maybe you’re right.” Akuto was genuinely unsure.

“Now, I’m going into energy-saver mode, or what you call ‘sleep.’ Have fun.”



She knelt in front of the sleeping Nonimora and closed her eyes.. She seemed to have shut off some of her functions.

Then Keena returned.

“The toilet tree was pretty amazing,” she said, clearly entertained. It was like the old Keena had come back.

“I don’t need the details,” he responded like would have before, and then laid down. Keena laid down next to him.

For a while they said nothing. The sun had already completely set, and the light of the glowing tree was illuminating her face. The leaves of the trees blocked out the sky, and the lights of the distant glowing trees seemed like lampposts in the darkness.

“A lot’s happened,” Akuto began.

“Huh?” Keena seemed confused.

“I wanted to apologize, I guess,” he said, but the answer wasn’t what he expected.

“You haven’t done anything to apologize for, have you?”

“But...” His tone had turned serious without him realizing it.

“...It feels like I haven’t been giving you much attention lately.”

“Heheh...” She smiled and pressed herself up against him. “If you finally understand, that’s all that matters.”

“It’s hard, isn’t it? To me, it’s just normal now, though,” Akuto whispered, and Keena’s answered was whispered back.

“It’s not hard... It’s scary.”

“Scary?”

“There’s a me who’s me but isn’t me.”

“Yeah. I guess I know who you’re talking about.”

“And I think that me can do more amazing things than I can. It can really do the things that I can’t really do.”

“I know that, too.” Akuto felt like he knew what it was that was scaring her.

“So it feels like since you’re doing all this amazing stuff, you’re gonna need her, not me...” Her voice grew quieter.

“It seemed like you were getting along with the you who wasn’t you, though.”

“That’s why it’s scary. I don’t know how much of me is me anymore. But there really is a normal me, who can only do normal things...” She was speaking quickly, as if to hide the quavering in her voice. When Akuto realized this and glanced over at her, she turned away. But he could see a small trace of tears in her eyes.

“Keena,” he said, but she didn’t turn around.

“That’s why I thought, Ackie, that you liked me for the things that the me who wasn’t me could do, so I started thinking what the me that wasn’t me could do for you that the me who wasn’t me couldn’t, and I thought that maybe the answer was hem-hem...”

Keena was clearly starting to lose it.

"The me who isn't me is kind of like me but sometimes I realize that the me who isn't me is doing things that I wouldn't do and sometimes the me who isn't me talks like she's me so it's starting to feel like maybe I'm the me who's not me..."

As she babbled, she started to sob, until Akuto grabbed her tight.

"Hyah!" She let out a short scream.

"Um... I'm not sure how to say this, but..."

He buried his face in her hair and put his lips up to her ear.

"Um... okay..."

Keena had completely frozen.

"You're very dear to me. I don't need you because you're useful to me. What's important to me is that you eat a lot of rice, or fall asleep next to me. Things like that. So even if there is no reason, I need you by my side. To me, not having a reason is my reason," he whispered as he held her tighter.

Keena let out a short breath and shivered.

"I'm sorry... Did that hurt?"

"No... No that's not it. It just made me happy." Keena fidgeted nervously and turned around to face Akuto.

"Hey... You're making me blush."

Akuto's cheeks turned red as he stared into her eyes. Keena's did too.

"But I'd rather face this way," Keena said, and buried her face in his chest.

"Okay." Akuto nodded, and lifted the hand he'd had wrapped around her body to run his fingers through her hair. He held her head to his chest and gently stroked her.

"That tickles..." Keena leaned forward and then looked up, her eyes pointing upward. Her eyes met Akuto's. Both of them couldn't look away from the other. The only sound was their breathing and heartbeats, which were pounding out a complicated rhythm. There was a tension between them that threatened to shatter with even a single word from either one of them.

"...Are we going to do it?" Keena asked.

Akuto didn't know what to say. Time passed as they just stared at one another. The finger he'd put in her hair suddenly moved, running down the back of her head and to her neck. Keena gasped a little. And then...

"Don't do hem-hem in secret!"

The two of them jumped apart. But when they turned around to look at Nonimora, she was completely asleep, with drool coming out of her mouth.

"She's talking in her sleep..."

“That’s a weird thing to say in your sleep...”

The two of them whispered to each other covertly. And then both of them started to laugh.

“I’m going to sleep, too,” Keena said, and this time she innocently jumped into Akuto’s arms.

“Yeah, let’s get some rest,” he said as he put his arm around her neck. Keena used it as a pillow as she lay down next to him.

“But I’m sure, from now on, something will...”

“Huh?” Akuto asked.

But there was no answer. Keena was already asleep.

○

“Young mistress, that’s going to be difficult,” One of the young Hattori ninjas said.

“But all the machines are ready, right?”

Yuko was in the comms room of a military command center, less than an hour away by train from the imperial capital. Four operators were sitting in front of a wall of equipment, and Yuko was talking to their leader, telling him to broadcast the video they were recording to the whole country. Now that she’d sent Hiroshi off, she wanted to do what she could to help in her own way.

“That’s not the issue. The cabinet’s in charge of this stuff. C-MID8 probably put them up to it. Technically, we can do what you’re asking, but nobody will take responsibility for it.”

The ninja was wearing a soldier’s outfit, and so was Yuko. He was trying his best to argue with her.

“Dad’ll take responsibility. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t be crazy. Listen, do you understand what’s going on here? The Hattori specialize in spycraft. Of course, we don’t want C-MID8 to have the upper hand here. But it’s not just an issue of authority. They’re watching the whole network.”

“Really?” Yuko asked, surprised.

“That’s right. Anybody can do guerilla uploads of videos to the network now. But, and I have no idea how they did this, the Cabinet government has forbidden uploading video to the network at all. It’s not even that the cabinet’s censoring the news. They’re the only source of it. And what they’re saying is different than the information we’re getting.”

The ninja was trying his best to persuade her, but Yuko wasn’t about to back down.

“Brave is on his way. If we show them that they’ll all realize the truth.”

“Maybe you’re right. How can we give the people proof that C-MID8 wants war with the Republic? Until we can do that, we’re

stuck."

"And we can get that proof by showing them the scene of the crime!"

"We can't sacrifice the Hattori clan for something so uncertain. Young mistress, please understand. Even if there is a war, we'll win. The rest is only minor obstacles."

"That's not acceptable. Nobody knows what the Republic is, which is why they think it's not a problem to start a war with them."

Yuko sighed and turned around. Yoshie and Keisu were there. She'd gotten Junko to ask them for help.

"Unfortunately, your operator friend is right," Yoshie said, her arms crossed in thought. When she'd gone to save Hiroshi from Rubbers, she'd heard most of what was going on, as well as the fact that it was probably a plot by The One.

"Nobody will believe us without proof. If it weren't for our relationship with C-MID8, even we'd laugh at the idea of a talking dog named 'The One.'"

"Then what are we supposed to do? Brave is already on his way."

Yuko pointed to one of the mana screens that Yoshie had called up and projected near her side. It showed the video coming in from Hiroshi. Right now, it showed nothing but endless blue seas. This video was only shared between Hiroshi and Yoshie, and wasn't being uploaded to the network.

"If what the operator said is true, and it's impossible to upload this to the network, then some expert in cyberwarfare is behind it. Some kind of superman, too. I'm sure his codename is probably the Electronic Fairy or something." Yoshie nodded to herself.

"No one cares."

"Really? Anyway, there's two ways to do this. One is to defeat the Electronic Fairy. That'd a little tough. I hate to say it, because I've got my own pride as a hacker, but right now we just don't have enough information."

"And our other option?" Yuko sounded hopeful, but Yoshie chuckled.

"This one's simple, but difficult. We convince the prime minister."

"Huh?"

"The head of the cabinet is the prime minister, and the prime minister runs the whole army, too. Right now they're just doing what C-MID8, that is, what USD, tells them to."

"Oh, right. But we can't do that!" Yuko pouted. But then Yoshie grinned.

"We've got a better shot at this one, though. If we put something provocative onto the network, USD will hear it, right? And if he was betrayed, then he can't be happy about what The One is up to. If

nothing else, we can show him something. The rest is up to C-MID8 themselves."

"We have to bet on something so uncertain?" Yuko complained, but Yoshie just smiled.

"You were trying to bet your whole family on something that you had no idea would work. I'm a big fan of going all in, but you know, the show's only just getting started, right?"

"About that show..." The ninja spoke up.

"Whassup?" Yoshie asked.

"It's begun, for real," The ninja said, his voice tense.

"It ended up starting for real, huh?"

Yoshie looked at the video C-MID8 was showing online and compared it to what was coming in from Hiroshi. She rewound Hiroshi's video a bit, until she saw a beam of mana light fall from the sky.

"Oh dear... So it was this "Codename Esper" or whatever who struck first?"

C-MID8's video cut off a few seconds after that, just when the Republic submarines launched their missiles.

"If only the video from Brave was a little clearer."

"Brave's a surprisingly slow flyer, isn't he?"

"Esper probably saw Brave coming and decided to take the initiative. Which means Brave may not make it in time," Yoshie whispered.

"Did C-MID8 plan all this?"

"Probably. When we lost contact with the Empress's ship, that was probably their doing," Yoshie said. The Ninja nodded.

"The Republic seems to be trying to avoid conflict. They're ignoring his other attacks and the King is repeatedly trying to make contact on official channels. But the Prime Minister is strongly rebuffing him. Of course, legally the prime minister is the one who should talk to him, but this wouldn't have happened if he could have contacted the Empress. The King's been trying, after all."

Yuko frowned and stormed over to the ninja.

"If you knew all this, why couldn't you stop the war?"

"Because..." The Ninja frowned and shook his head. "The higher-ups want a war. We can't stop them. And even we didn't expect it to turn out this way. Think about it. The Empire hasn't been in an external war for over a thousand years. No, there barely is anything outside the empire anymore. So this is the first time we're realizing that it's actually possible to start a war if you want one."

"Yeah, that's right. Everybody was scared of the Demon King who caused so much damage to our country. We've focused for so long on not creating another Demon King. But when you look outside, you

realize that it's possible for our country to be the aggressor. No, I guess we already are."

Yoshie pointed at the mana screen. Kei was sinking the Republic's submarines one after another.

○

"I'm not going to make it in time?" Maybe it really was all planned from the start, he wondered to himself. He was flying over endless open ocean. Since there was nothing to block his view, he could see the gunfire in the distance. It was irritating him.

—So after everything I said, I still can't do anything?

He wasn't completely sure what was going on between Kei and the submarines, but it looked like Kei was trying to provoke them by attacking them. The only other information he had was coming from the news broadcast that Yuko's group was sending him. Of course, there was a time lag in the video. It took time to alter the footage. They were making the video follow the story they'd prepared. In other words: negotiations had broken down because of the Republic's actions, and then the Republic had fired first.

Videos of the sinking submarines were already reaching Hiroshi. He was almost there, but by the time he arrived would there be any left?

He heard a huge explosion, and a pillar of water rose high into the air. By the time he finally got there, the battle was basically over. He'd arrived just in time to see the last sub sink. There was foam everywhere, caused by the bubbles formed from the sinking subs. He could see a film of oil and tiny pieces of metal.

Above it all was an opponent he'd fought before.

From the events that had occurred so far, he must've been there for days without resupply, but his beauty hadn't decreased at all.

Kei was still alluring and elegant, and cruelly charming. And what he was doing was perfectly true to his cruel appearance. Some people Hiroshi didn't recognize had been lifted out of the water by Kei's magic. The color of their skin was slightly different than that of an imperial. But the biggest difference was the fins on their arms. They were clearly creatures that lived underwater, but they had the silhouettes of humans.

These humans were hanging in the air, expressions of pain on their faces. There were around 30 of them in all. From their numbers, they were probably the crew of several of the submarines. Seeing all of them there, frozen in place by the Demon King, made terror well up in Hiroshi's heart. And an even uglier and more terrible scene, one Hiroshi couldn't look away from, came only a moment later.

Kei used his telekinesis to tear off their heads. The blood spurted

up about a dozen meters, and began to rain down like a shower. Kei used his powers to freeze even the blood as well. There were drops of crimson of all different sizes, floating in the sky like water droplets in zero gravity. For someone who could guess what kind of magic that would require, it was a shocking sight. But what would surprise someone even who had no idea of the power this would require was how clearly Kei was enjoying it.

The survivors' faces twisted in fear as they realized they would be next. But as if to betray their expectations, Kei suddenly ripped all their torsos in half. Even after the loss of your torso, your consciousness remains for several seconds. Hiroshi was able to see the expressions of disbelief form on their faces. He could tell from the joy on Kei's face that he'd done it just to see that look.

Hiroshi could see it all clearly. He was using his suit's zoom function, which could see the expressions on the faces of the Republic soldiers, as well as Kei's, clearly. Brutality. Cruelty. Fear. Rage. All those words came to him a moment later. He felt something hard pressing down on his heart, and his whole body felt like it was on fire. His ears couldn't hear a thing, but something from within was exploding as it headed toward his mouth.

He was probably screaming.

For the first time, Kei turned towards him. Kei had probably known he was there the whole time, though. Maybe he'd killed them sooner than he'd planned to for just that reason. Kei's expression was the opposite of Hiroshi's: cool and collected.

"Has anyone ever been shown cruelty as beautifully as you? Or are you my only audience? Unfortunately, the King wasn't here." Kei turned to Hiroshi and softly smiled.

It had the effect of bringing Hiroshi down from his angry high. A huge sphere appeared in the air. It was formed from all the crimson droplets. The ball glistened in the sunlight, and the wind formed tiny waves across its surface. In the center of it was Kei, holding out both his hands. It was like a beautiful picture, whose painter was the demon king. It was a work of art made by a man who knew his own beauty and power, and used others lives to paint it.

"I don't care what's going on! Don't move!" Hiroshi charged.

He activated his suit's mana canceler and set all weapons except his plasma ball to standby.

"Don't be in such a hurry. The real beauty is just about to appear," Kei said, and waved a hand.

The droplets all began to fall, like gravity had suddenly returned. A rain of blood poured down. A rainbow appeared in the falling blood, one the same color as any other rainbow, but which felt strangely different.

“Defeating you will be easy!” Hiroshi said as he charged through the rainbow. But Kei flew backwards and refused to fight him.

“I know. That’s why I’m going to run. Your suit was given to you by someone else, but as long as you have their permission, it’s yours. But I don’t know when they’re going to take that permission from you.”

“I don’t care! I’m going to do what I can! Get back here!” Hiroshi yelled, but Kei just ignored him and dodged.

“I refuse. If he doesn’t turn off your suit, it means he wants you to kill me. I’ve achieved my goal. I’m going to run.”

Kei flew through the air, forming a teleportation circle with his own hands, and then he vanished into it.

“Wait, damn it! What are you going to do now...!”

Hiroshi yelled, but his words just echoed in the sea as the bloody rain fell.

(Calm down. I have the video. Even if we can’t publicize it, we may be able to get it to USD.)

Yuko’s voice brought Hiroshi back to his senses. He didn’t realize it, but he might’ve been screaming for a long time.

“The equipment you gave me helped a lot. Thanks,” he said, as he touched the camera attached to the side of his helmet.

“I’ll take some footage of the sea surface and then head home,” he said, as he started to approach the scene of the tragedy and record. The blood had already vanished into the sea’s blue, but sharks were gathering around the corpses.

“This is awful...”

He heard Yuko’s voice, but didn’t know what else to say. He thought of attacking the sharks to relieve his frustration, but there wasn’t any point. But then he saw something that wasn’t a corpse floating among the sharks.

It was a dolphin lying on its side that was probably caught up in the attack. Its belly was exposed and its fin had been nibbled off. There was a shark beneath it that would poke at it occasionally.

—If it died in the fight, I feel bad for it...

“Huh?” Hiroshi gasped.

Something was pushing the dolphin’s belly upwards from within. A blade suddenly poked out from it, and began to saw it apart from within.

“Someone’s coming out...”

Hiroshi readied for a fight. The dolphin’s belly split open and a human arm came out. He could tell immediately that it was someone from the Republic.

—He’d said he missed the king, didn’t he?

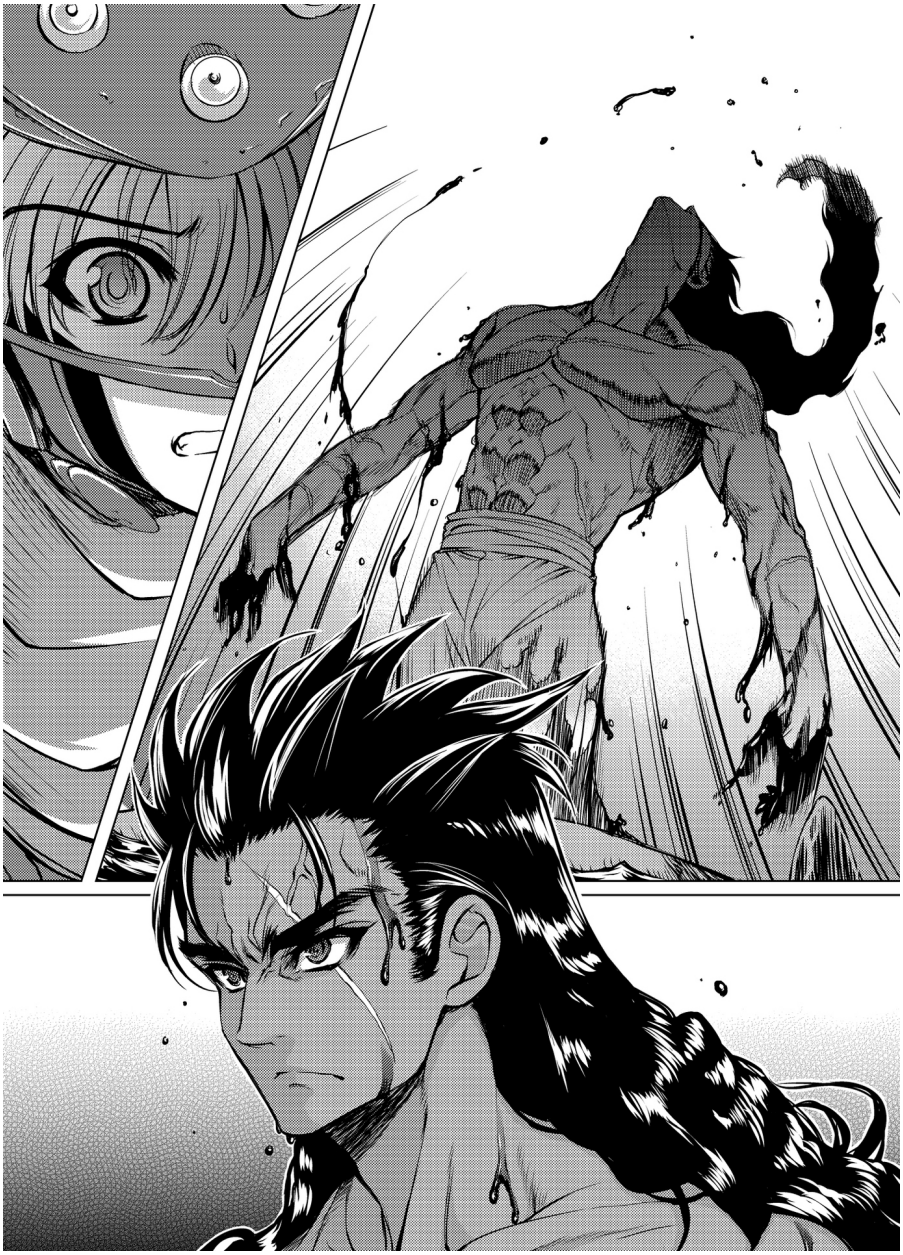
What he’d heard before was that the king of the Republic was

supposed to be on board one of the submarines. Hiroshi saw a powerful looking young man appear from within the dolphin covered in blood. He was covered in blood, but he looked at Hiroshi with a fierce glint in his eyes.

"If nothing else, I'm your enemy's enemy," Hiroshi said as he charged through the rainbow. The young man moved away from the dolphin's belly and into the sea.

Several of the sharks approached him, drawn by the smell of blood. The young man's knife flashed, slightly injuring one of the shark's noses. That was enough to keep the rest of them away.

The young man buried his face in the water, returned the knife to a case at his side, and washed his face with seawater. He pushed back his hair with both hands, revealing a face that was handsome and imposing.



“I watched helplessly at what happened outside. I don’t know who you are, but I thank you for screaming on behalf of my friends.”

The young man spoke in a loud, clear voice. There was a calm and honest air about his words.

“It’s a shameful thing to have survived alone, but one of my men sacrificed this innocent dolphin’s life to save me. Now I must work to repay the sacrifice they made. When this is over, you may ask me for any boon you wish. I am the King of the Republic, Marine.”

“Brave.” Hiroshi gave his name.

Marine nodded and moved to dive back in the sea, but Hiroshi felt a sudden stirring in his head. The next thing he knew he was calling out to Marine.

“Wait!”

“What is it?” Marine looked up at him. Hiroshi offered Marine a hand.

“Let me work for you.”

Marine seemed suspicious.

“There’s no reason for you to do that. Think about whether that desire springs from more than a moment’s emotion.”

Hiroshi paused. But then he reached out a hand.

“Then let me work for you until you meet the Empress, at least.”

“The Empress?”

“I know what’s going on here. If you really do want a peaceful solution, and that solution involves the next heir to the throne and dealing with all these problems, you and I want the same thing,” Hiroshi said as he charged through the rainbow.

Marine thought for a second before taking Hiroshi’s hand.

“I thank you, Hero.”

○

Meanwhile, Fujiko was away from the others, sneaking into an apartment near the academy. Normally, a girl like Fujiko sneaking into your apartment would be a cause for celebration, but this time, there was no hint of any fun in the air. She was more like a thief.

“Answer the question.”

Inside, she’d strung a rope from the ceiling and hung it around the neck of a man who was sitting there. The room’s table was flipped over, and a bowl of ramen had been knocked over, spilling its noodles and soup onto the floor.

“A-Answer what question?”

The rope was loose around his neck, so he couldn’t resist as he flailed his limbs about. His hair was a mess and he wore strange glasses. It was Issei Suzuki, the former leader of the black mages. He was the “former” leader now because Fujiko had stolen the black

mages' secret, and after the priests had captured him, he'd decided to retire. But right after he'd started his new life, Fujiko had broken in and strangled him. Not a good start.

"There was something I didn't understand from the documents. No, you could say that because of those documents, there's something I came to understand."

Fujiko already had all the information about the black mages she'd stolen from Issei. It was all technical information, though, with little information about their network or its origins. That was what she wanted to know. Issei had been around long enough that he probably knew how the black mages came about through his connections.

"Is there some relationship between the republic and the black mages?"

"Oh... is that it? Well... I guess that wasn't in the database whose password I gave you," he said, painfully. He gestured at his neck.

Fujiko loosened the rope and repeated her question.

"So there is some relationship, right?"

"I don't have any proof myself, but I realized when I heard the news about the Republic's origins. When the Empire was founded, believers in pure freedom left the country. They probably founded the Republic."

"Kazuko said they all died, didn't she?"

"You saw the database, right? It says they died, so what I'm telling you now is just a guess."

"Maybe they still have the records. Also, I don't know what it is you want so badly, but if it's perfect freedom, the ideal of the black mages, you should just join the Republic."

When she heard this Fujiko yanked tight on the rope again.

"Wait, so in the end, do you not know anything?"

"Uwah... Wait, wait! This is what happened."

Issei coughed to clear his throat so that he could begin.

"You'd better not be making something up just to save your own skin."

"No, I'm being serious..." he said. "The Demon King system was originally intended as an internal thing. In other words, once we created the social system we have now, with the gods, it would only be natural that everybody would be able to use its resources. So the Empire created rules that stopped everyone from killing each other. And the Demon King is something that's free from those rules."

"I've heard that story before."

"Yes. But when I heard about the existence of the Republic I realized that only applied within the Empire."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that even if we did change the system, and the black

mages' ideal world came to pass, it probably wouldn't destroy humanity. It would probably destroy the Empire, though."

Fujiko already understood that much.

"I see... You're right."

"Yeah. So even if the Demon King starts a war, it's not clear whether it would destroy humanity.'

"I can accept that as well," Fujiko nodded.

"So don't you think it's strange? If the Demon king is a weapon like Kazuko said, he's too strong. And if he's what the Gods insist he is, something that will destroy humanity, he's too weak."

"If the Demon King can really only use resources from within the Empire, then he can't be something that threatens all humanity..." Fujiko whispered.

No matter how much a heretic she was within the Empire, she was still an Imperial. But once she was freed from that perspective, it was the logical conclusion.

"...But Kazuko said the Law of Identity didn't exist, even though she should have known better..."

"She was lying. Or maybe she didn't know the truth. That's possible. Even if the Gods and the Demon King are working together, neither the Empire nor the Demon King has the power to destroy all humanity. If anything does, it has to come from the outside. In other words... an Outer God. A real God, in the true sense."

What Issei said made sense. And it matched the few things that Boichiro Yamato had said that she'd managed to catch.

"So you're telling me... a real god exists?" Fujiko said, with terror in her voice.

"I don't even want to think about it myself, but first we had the problems with Empress Kazuko and now the Republic. It's the only thing that makes sense. You had the same thought, which is why you came to me, right?"

Issei took the robe, which was now slack, off his neck and looked up. Fujiko was already gone.

—Everything points to the existence of a real god...

Who could deal with such terror? Fujiko was struck with an indescribable fear.

4 - Colorless Flames

She was watching the sea. But there was nothing romantic about it.

—No Imperial citizen has ever looked at the sea like this before, I bet.

Junko was sitting in a command center that had been hastily erected on an observation deck in a seaside town, looking out the window. The command center was getting video feeds, but an old manual she'd read once said it was better to see with your own eyes.

She and her ninjas were responsible for running information up and down the front lines. Her father was in command of the troops, but of course, he wasn't there personally. He'd simply sent members of his family instead.

Ground troops had assembled in the seaside town. There were ground cars, soldiers, flying cards... a division of each, assembled and ready to go. All their guns were pointed at the sea. And far away in the distance, they could see several shadows clinging tight against the waterline. They were submarines.

—But Yuko said they weren't going anywhere...

Junko had heard what was going on from Yuko via an encoded line. She hadn't passed that message on to the Hattori troops, though.

—The King of the Republic must be a well-respected man. And he must have told them not to start a war...

She knew Yuko wasn't lying to her, but it bothered her that this King had abandoned the battlefield. Was it because he had something more important to do?

"I hope nothing happens..." Junko said to herself.

"Mistress, kindness is forbidden in this place," one of the Hattori ninjas said to her, reprovingly.

She gave a slight nod.

"I understand that, but after what we just saw..."

She was referring to the video footage of Kei sinking the submarines. But of course, it was the edited version. The edited version showed the Republic attacking first, and didn't show the massacre that took place afterwards. Kei's power seemed unstoppable. Edited or not, that seemed undeniable.

She didn't know how serious the Republic was, but in a magical battle The Empire, no, Kei, clearly had the upper hand.

"I know you're concerned about Republic casualties, but that pity has no place here."

"No... that's not what bothers me. It scares me that the C-MID8

Esper is becoming a hero."

What worried Junko was the Prime Minister's announcement. The PM had said that a Demon King had destroyed the submarines. But this Demon King, according to the announcement, was just a servant of Akuto, the Great Demon King who'd surrendered to the Empress's glory."

"That man didn't look to me like he was under the Empress's control..."

"That's not all. What scares me is the way the people acted. Once they were told that he was an Imperial secret weapon, the people ceased to have a problem with him. That's a change in the way they think about the Demon King. I didn't expect them to change so much just because something appeared from outside the Empire."

Her voice was filled more with shock than disgust.

"The greatest threat to the Empire has now been recognized as its greatest weapon. That's all. Of course, I understand how you feel, but that's all it is."

Junko understood that as well. But the fact that she understood it made her afraid.

"So what do we do when something comes from even further outside? Do we rely on humanity's ultimate weapon to deal with it for us?"

"Now's not the time to think about things like that," the ninja scolded, but Junko didn't agree. Maybe she'd realized on some level that the situation was starting to indicate the existence of a real god.

"He says all the time that people recognize what's going on around them as a story, so why is it that I feel like when something that doesn't fit into that story appears, it means tragedy is coming?"

"Mistress..."

"...No, I'm sorry. I'll go back to my job as a useless figurehead. All we're doing here is getting ready for a conflict that might not occur anyway. And even if it does, it won't be a big one. There's no way we can lose. I'm right, aren't I?" Junko said, even though she didn't believe it, and everyone nodded.

"Of course, that's correct, Mistress."

But their words didn't come from the heart.

—Nobody can really be strong at a time like this.

Junko looked back to the horizon and let out a long breath. She was starting to feel like everything that had happened was a lie.

○

"So if we head to this village of the Marlay, it's possible I can meet the Empress," Marine said to Hiroshi, who was carrying him.

Hiroshi was flying above the sea. He looked at the coordinates for

the Marlay village that Yoshie had given him, and nodded.

"There's been no word from them yet, but the Empress has guards with her. She should be fine."

Marine had asked to be brought directly the Empress. He wanted to go to where the Jeweled Branch was. If Hiroshi could get him there, a war would become much less likely. According to the king, it was a better shot than just sending him back to his men, anyway.

"Why did you just make contact with your country instead of going back?"

"I'm the King, but it's a republic. Which means I don't have absolute power. The nobles have a say of their own. If they all come together, I can't go against them."

"And they'll choose to fight?"

"We hate the Empire. Even more, after what just happened."

"I can understand that."

"I told them I was alive, but they're more than eager to deploy the army. I have no choice but to let them. But our goal is to use the Jeweled Branch to seal away the terrifying Faceless Power," Marine said.

Hiroshi realized that their version of the Faceless Power legend was different.

"The Faceless Power is terrifying? And why do you have the Empire? There's a lot of things I want to ask you. Can you tell me the whole story?"

"The Republic is made of people who fled the Empire. We went to war because we opposed the God system, and lost, and escaped to the bottom of the sea."

"Why the bottom of the sea?"

"It was the only unexplored frontier. The fact that we could do genetic engineering was a part of it too. And the greatest reason was..."

"The greatest reason?"

"...No. Never mind. It's a sad reality," Marine shook his head.

Hiroshi didn't ask questions.

"Our country is every bit as old as the Empire. We forbid any contact with the Empire, and for the most part that was followed. Some people from the Republic went to the Empire, but nothing came of it except a few rumors."

"You can find rumors of monsters appearing anywhere. But I can't believe the gods missed that."

"No, we use mana as well. We simply looked like unbaptized foreigners, I'm sure. We have our own system instead of the gods. A system where everyone can use magic equally."

"Doesn't that result in war?"

“You can only use magic in proportion to your individual mana. There are rules against enhancing your mana like that Devil did. And those rules are followed. Some humans have more mana than others, but no one has that much. It’s not that different from any society where the use of weapons is allowed.”

By “Devil” Marine was referring to Kei.

“And that’s why you lost the battle?”

“We were equipped with mana weapons and mana cancelers. But his combat abilities went far beyond that. That’s all there is to it. We realized for the first time that the greatest weapon is the ability to control mana particles with the human mind. And at the same time, we felt new respect for our ancestors who rejected that weapon. There is only one power that can surpass that.”

“What is it?”

“A sealed weapon. From before Mana Civilization. It’s called a Nuclear Fusion Blast. You’ve at least heard of it, right?

“I know that it’s the ultimate energy. And of course, that it’s completely uncontrollable.”

“Mana civilization exists because we abandoned it. What does that tell you?”

“...Wait, are you saying that the Faceless Power is...?” Hiroshi gasped. But Marine laughed and shook his head.

“No, that’s incorrect. This is what the Republic says about the Faceless Power: It’s the power that forms the foundation of the mind. And that’s why it’s believed to bring true liberation. We think it’s something that needs to be studied, not used.”

“The Republic says its a power that will guide people,” Hiroshi said. Marine seemed to think for a moment.

“I’d like to say that a legend is a legend, but that seems too optimistic to me. You can take a more pessimistic view, and say that there’s no way it can be a power that guides people.”

“The Marlay legends say that if a good heart uses it, it will lead to good results. And if a bad heart uses it, it will lead to bad results.”

“Isn’t it strange how that assumes an absolute basis for good and evil? Of course, ‘true liberation’ is a rather vague term, but given the implied image of destruction and creation, it can’t be something that’s safe to touch.”

“You’ll probably get along with the Empress and her bodyguard then.” Hiroshi smiled. His visor wasn’t covering his face, so Marine saw his expression.

“Then not everyone is trying to unleash that power?” Marine smiled.

“Yeah. Don’t worry.”

Before long, they arrived at the Marlay village.

○

“We’re here,” Nonimora said excitedly.

The tower was close. It was so big now that it extended past the eye’s field of vision. If you craned your head all the way upward you could barely see the light at the top.

“We need to contact someone when we get to the village. I’m sure a lot of people are worried. Wait, is there a way to contact the Empire from the village?” Akuto asked. Nonimora nodded.

“You can use mana in the village, so yes.”

“Then can we teleport to get back immediately?” Korone asked.

“Yeah. Something might have happened while we were gone.” Akuto nodded. But Nonimora shook her head.

“The Village doesn’t have enough energy to teleport you all the way to the Empire.”

In the same way that mana wasn’t infinite, there was a limit to how much energy could be used as well. Magical civilization just used the energy that was supplied to it. In the Empire, the energy traveled through the Earth, and sometimes through the mana itself, and could even be used over water. But here in the Marlay village they were surrounded by mana-absorbing trees and only got energy from their own generators.

“And you can make contact, but if you’re sending it through high-altitude mana, it won’t be very efficient,” Nonimora added.

“But your power was really strong, wasn’t it?” Akuto asked. Nonimora nodded.

He was referring to the incredible speed with which her plants had swallowed up the school, and the speed she’d shown in battle.

“Just like I said before, I’m using a little of the Faceless Power. A good heart gives you good power. It’s not that difficult.”

Nonimora laughed innocently.

“The Faceless Power, huh? I don’t know what it is, but the Marlay were closest to it, so it seems like their legends are the most reliable.”

“Anyway, when we get there I want to eat something,” Keena said.

“You haven’t had any rice, come to think of it.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have that much. We eat Mok-Mok.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry. It’s good. And when you come to a new place you should eat new food. Hey, you know, you were really upset yesterday but today you’re fine. Did he give you Hem-Hem? Depending on how you do it it can make men and women get along a lot better.”

Nonimora poked Keena’s butt with her elbow.

“Come on...” Keena blushed.

“Guys, we’re out of the jungle, but...”

Just like Akuto had said, when they passed between the last of the huge trees they came upon a clearing. They could see a village with buildings made from wood.

“Oh, it’s the village. We’re back!” Nonimora said happily.

There seemed to be about 10 to 20 small villages in all around the area. None of them had buildings larger than 2 stories, and the roofs were made of simple grass. They were all dotted along a path that ran down the center, and in the distance they could see a river.

“Hello!”

When they heard Nonimora’s voice, several people poked their heads out of the windows. They all had skin the color of Nonimora’s, and eyes filled with curiosity.

“The Chief’s back!”

“Get the elder!”

More and more villagers started to appear. There were men and women of all ages, but no one seemed to be working that hard, because the faces of the children and the adults seemed equally cheerful. Most of them were wearing casual outfits, but a few of them were wearing clothes similar to Akuto.

“Well, people are really loose around here. They’ll probably be rude to you in some way or another, but while you’re here, loosen up too. Though I guess men don’t like girls who are loose during pak-pak.”

Nonimora started to walk further into the village.

Akuto, Keena, and Korone followed, and the villagers stared at them in curiosity.

“Hehehe...” Keena waved at them, and they waved back.

Korone held up her fingers in a V sign, and some of the villagers copied her.

When she realized this, she wrapped her right hand around the back of her head and pulled on the upper side of her left ear. Again, some of the villagers laughed, and did the same.

Then she pulled her elbow up to her face, like she was wrapping her arm around her neck, and licked the end of her elbow. The villagers tried to copy her, and realized that they couldn’t. Surprised, some of them began to frantically bring their elbows closer to their faces.

“Don’t start any weird trends,” Akuto said.

Korone expressionlessly spun her elbow at a strange angle.

“This is one way to identify a Liradan. If you ever need to tell the difference between a Liradan and a human, please try it.”

“Who put that function in?” Akuto asked, but then a moment later Nonimora told them that they’d arrived at their destination. It was what seemed to be a park at the end of the village. At the center was a

building that seemed to be modern, even by imperial standards. This village was a strange mixture of natural and artificial architecture, and it was hard to say which was more dominant.

The residences seemed to be made of primitive, natural materials, but the buildings that maintained the infrastructure seemed to be even more modern than the empire. But the building in the park seemed to be different from those, too.

If anything, it reminded them of the buildings they'd seen on the lunar city. It was probably built during the earliest days of the Empire. A tower stretched out of it like a tall, thick tree. This was where the Faceless Power was supposedly sealed.

"This is where the ship that goes to the stars is?" Akuto asked. Nonimora nodded.

The building seemed to be 5 stories tall. To Akuto, it seemed to be about the same size as a decently-large general hospital. It was far too small to hold a spaceship.

"That's right. The ship isn't that big. It's about the size of several trucks from your country," Nonimora said, just as an old man walked out of the building.

His face was covered in deep wrinkles, which seemed to bury both his eyes and mouth. In fact, his face seemed to be composed of nothing but wrinkle lines. He must have been unfathomably old, Akuto thought.

"Oh, Elder!" Nonimora cheerfully waved.

The wrinkles on the elder's face parted, and they heard him speak.

"Welcome home. Who's this?"

"The new Empress of Japan and her guards," Nonimora explained.

Keena and Akuto introduced themselves, and the elder spoke in a low, difficult to decipher mumble, which may or may not have been a laugh.

"Hoo... hoo... hoo... Then the Jeweled Branch is here."

"Yes." Keena took a box out of her bag. Nonimora explained the situation.

"Yup. We brought it here. Keena Soga, the Empress here, says that she'll let me be Empress. But she wants to talk about it first, so we came here."

The elder nodded.

"Very good. Come inside, then," he said, and started to walk. Akuto and the others followed him inside.

The place felt to Akuto like some kind of lab.

"The Jeweled Branch is the key to the ship that goes to the stars, but that's not all," the elder said, to no one in particular.

"Nonimora told us that it lets you use the Faceless Power."

"That's right. But not the whole story."

The elder got into an elevator. He waited for everyone else to enter, before pushing the button for the 5th floor. The elevator ascended and the doors opened, revealing a wide open area with no walls. The area was dominated by a large, thick tube. It was the tower that ran through this building. There was a hole at one point in the tower's wall. If "hole" wasn't the right word, then perhaps a door which made passage to the cylinder's hollow inside possible.

"This is the ship that goes to the stars." The elder pointed inside.

Just like Nonimora had said, on the other side of the hole was a vehicle whose exterior was smooth, flowing lines, the side of several trucks. No, perhaps it only seemed like a vehicle because of what they'd been told earlier. It was like a missile, laying on its side. It was silver, with no windows, and not even a single word of lettering on it.

"The Faceless Power is sealed within this. We are capable of using a fraction of its strength without any outside help."

Nonimora nodded out at the elder's words, but it was hard for Akuto to accept.

"So what is the Faceless Power, exactly?"

"An inexplicable power. No, that doesn't tell you anything. If I had to explain it, I would say it's the human psyche itself. The psyches of tens of thousands of people, all stuffed into one thing. What you see here is only a fraction of it, but it still has incredible power."

"I don't think there's many things you would need that power for..." Keena said. The elder nodded.

"Correct. But you must know this anyway. Think of the Faceless Power as a living thing. It's said that the Jeweled Branch chooses the emperor. Which means that the Faceless Power is what chooses the Emperor."

"Why do you know that?" Keena asked, and the Elder touched the side of the tower.

A mana screen appeared.

"I am a third generation researcher. Of course, we have nothing left to research now, so we just pass on what we know."

"What do you mean you have nothing left to research?" Akuto asked. The Elder let out another one of his strange laughs.

"Hoohoohoo. We know it's a lump of human psyches, but knowing that doesn't mean we can do anything with that knowledge. This is what we say when we talk to someone who's got a little education. What's inside this ship is a device which fixes a force field in place. An empty vessel, you could say. But when we attached devices to measure electrical and magnetic energy to it, it responded. The tip of this tower reacted to it. Though by "reacted", I mean all it did was change color slightly."

"It reacted even though it was empty? Are you sure it wasn't just

some kind of mistake?"

"We've confirmed it's creating energy from empty space. It's possible that the Faceless Power is an infinite power."

"Infinite..." Akuto fell silent.

"But what's inexplicable is the reason that I called it human. The Faceless Power changes its response in reaction to human emotion. Just as Nonimora said, those who have lived in this village a long time can use a portion of it for themselves."

There was something in his words that Akuto found hard to believe.

"But are you sure you're not making a mistake? What kind of power can understand human feelings?"

"Everyone, of course, assumed it was impossible. But we know we're dealing with a living thing. Emotions are nothing but inputs and outputs. No matter how complex the process, it's immediately obvious that there must exist some kind of rule. The problem isn't that, it's that power is coming forth out of completely empty space. If anything, this supports the unscientific way of thinking that says that consciousness doesn't come from an arrangement of complex amino acids, but from empty space. But that's what we've got. It's the truth, and there's nothing to be done about it."

"The truth?"

"The Faceless Power has taken a liking to Nonimora. She can interact with it better than anyone else. Even dogs have certain humans they like and certain humans they don't, right? But those likes and dislikes can't be explained by science."

"So even if we find it hard to believe, the truth is still the truth."

Akuto shrugged. But that gave rise to another problem.

"Then the reason you sent Nonimora is..."

"Correct. The Empress must consider how she will approach this power. At a minimum, if the Faceless Power likes her more than it likes Nonimora, that poses a problem."

Regardless of what you believed about the Elder's explanation, the fact remained that if the Empress was able to use a power like this, it would pose political problems.

"But first, we must return the Jeweled Branch to its proper place," the elder said.

"Return?" Keena said, confused. The Elder pointed to the Ship that Goes to the Stars.

"Except for the Faceless Power, everything here, including the tower and ship, were made in the early days of the empire. We know exactly what they were made for and how to use them. Of course, this includes the Jeweled Branch. It exists to control the Faceless Power, but primarily as a safety valve, to destroy it should that be necessary.

“To destroy it...”

“For that reason, the Jeweled Branch is said to choose the next Emperor or Empress. We can assume in doing so, it’s deciding whether or not to annihilate the Faceless Power.”

“Then it’s not like if you use the branch, you become the only person who can use the Faceless Power, right?”

“Some people, like Nonimora, become able to use it just by being near it. You don’t need to worry about that.”

“Then...” Keena opened up her bag and took out the box, and removed the Jeweled Branch from within it. It was a small branch, glowing softly, with several jewels attached to it. The Elder touched the surface of the ship, and a hole that looked like it was meant to fit a ball appeared.

“That doesn’t look like a spot to put a branch into...” Keena said, confused.

“The jewels come off,” the Elder explained. Just as he said, several of the jewels on the branch were detachable. The only thing left was the branch itself, and a single jewel at the end. The jewel at the end fit perfectly into the emplacement. The hole closed around the jewel as she pushed the branch inwards.

“This’ll do it, right?” she said, waving the branch, which now had no jewels left. But before she could check to see what happened, her gaze began to dart rapidly to the left and right around her.

“What’s wrong?” Akuto asked, but Keena kept turning her head.

“There’s a bug...” she whispered.

“A bug?”

“Yeah, there’s a bug... kyah!” Keena screamed. The branch was knocked out of her hand.

“What...?”

“Huh...?”

Akuto and Nonimora shouted. The Jeweled Branch wasn’t knocked out of her hand. It was floating in mid-air. But just as the branch seemed to be floating on its own, the “bug” clinging to its end became a shadow, which grew larger and larger.

“Oooh!?” Nonimora gasped in surprise.

At first it was the size of a small fly, but before long it was about 30 centimeters in length.

“So this is what sank our ship!”

Akuto understood instantly. The “bug,” which was actually a human, was flying, carrying the Jeweled Branch that was the same size it was. It was probably a mage with the ability to shrink themselves. And they’d probably been aboard the ship the whole time.

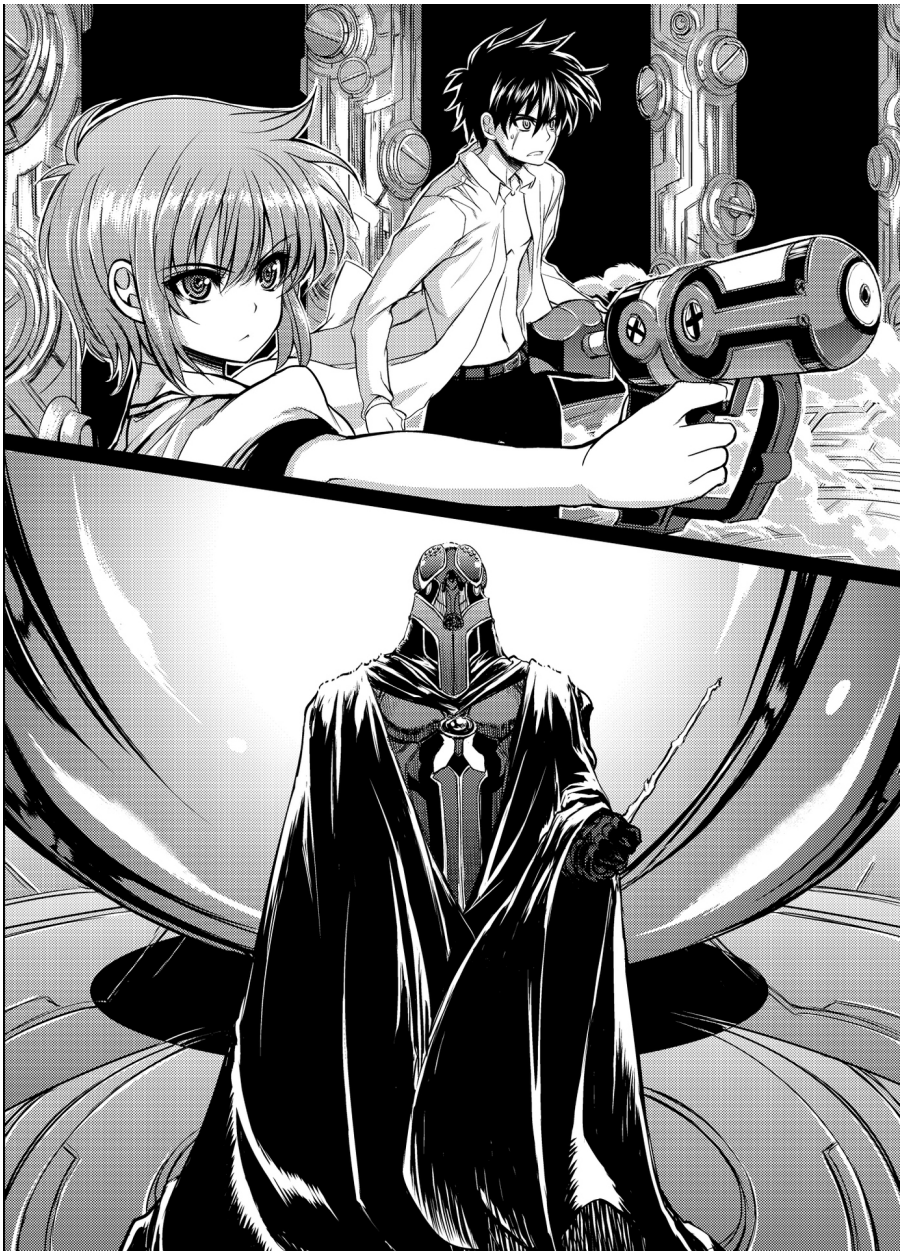
“I’ve been waiting for this moment!”

Its voice was high and squeaky because it was so small, but it was

definitely the voice of a human male. It was wearing a bodysuit and mask, which probably shrank and grew along with its body. The suit gave no clue to his identity, but he was clearly a member of C-MID8.

“Pests must be exterminated!”

Korone quickly took out a gun from her bag. But the enemy had predicted that. He quickly flew towards the floor’s emergency exit, with a speed that a normal bug might have. It was so fast that it almost seemed to be teleporting.



“If he’s just fast and nothing else...”

Akuto pointed his hand at the emergency exit. He tried to use his mana to trap the insect man. But...

“Huh...?”

Akuto wasn’t sure what had happened. He couldn’t properly control his mana.

“What’s going on...?” he said, confused, just as Nonimora started to run. She was fast, but the insect man was faster and smaller. He slipped out of her hands and vanished out a ventilation window. Nonimora threw a tantrum on the landing of the emergency stairs.

“You let him get away!”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t use my mana right...”

Akuto said as he came out onto the landing with her.

“It’s probably because the energy in this land is so weak. You can’t use as much mana here as you can in the Empire. You hadn’t realized how to deal with the difference yet,” Korone said.

“Hey, he took it. What do we do?” Keena asked.

The Elder had an answer.

“It’s okay... Or maybe, it’s not okay. But it’s not an issue for the moment. Anyone can use the Jeweled Branch, but only the Imperial Family can make the Faceless Power answer.”

“Then at least we can avoid the worst-case scenario... No, I don’t know what C-MID8 is planning, so we can’t be sure...” Akuto said, but then an incoming telepathic call was sent to Keena, interrupting his train of thought. Keena gasped when she saw the incoming call on her terminal.

“I had so much fun with the villagers I forgot to call home... It’s from the old man.”

Keena answered the call, and immediately heard a scream.

“Your Majesty! You’re safe! I’m so glad!”

It was Joji Yuki, with the royal guard.

“You’re being pretty loud. Listen, our ship suddenly crashed...” Keena tried to explain, but he cut her off with a voice that sounded like it was in tears.

“That’s not important now... Well, it IS important now... but also, the republic...!” Joji began to explain what happened.

When Akuto heard this, he began to wonder if he’d been wrong about the worst-case scenario.

○

When he arrived over the Marlay village, Hiroshi saw a warning on his visor and informed Marine of the situation.

“Sorry, we’ve got trouble.”

“What happened?’

“The area’s covered in a field. It’s the suit’s weak point. It would take a long time to explain, but the enemy is trying to drain me of my energy.”

“It seems there’s mana here, so I can fly too. But thank you for carrying me this far. I couldn’t have done it alone,” Marine said as he stepped away. Then he asked Hiroshi.

“So does this mean the enemy is nearby?”

“Correct. Somebody who works with the man you called the devil.” Marine’s expression changed when he heard this.

“Then they’re my enemy too. If you can’t fight, I will.”

“That’s a big help... Ahead of us. 15 degrees up, in the sky.”

Hiroshi used his visor to detect where the energy was present, and passed that information on to Marine. Marine must have seen it himself, because he nodded. There was an airship floating there. It was the about the same size as the royal airship, the largest ship an individual could pilot on their own. But it was clear from its exterior that it wasn’t the kind you could buy on the market. It was painted pitch black to hide its affiliation, and was bristling with weapons.

“C-MID8. That’s the name of their organization,” Hiroshi said bitterly.

“The mana is thin, and there’s not much energy. I’m not sure I can do this. I may be forced to withdraw.”

There was a bitterness in his eyes as he spoke, but his words were calm. He was an adult, Hiroshi realized.

“If you can shut down the VPS field generator, I can use my full power. And if that happens, we’re unbeatable.”

Marine nodded at his words.

“Understood.”

“I’ll do what I can with the energy I have, as well.”

Hiroshi tried to fly towards the ship, but was shocked when he looked at his energy gauge. It was draining faster than usual.

“What...?”

He scanned for the cause. It turned out to be the black airship. It was equipped not only with a mana disperser but also its own energy unit. The technology was probably the same type as the Brave Suit. That unit was draining the suit’s energy.

“Crap... Sorry, I have to fall back!” Hiroshi shouted, and then dropped into the jungle below to avoid dying from running out of energy. If he made it into the jungle, he could at least turn off his suit and hide.

—If it’s using the same technology as my suit, does that mean USD sent it?

Hiroshi landed in the jungle, feeling regret as he watched Marine fly away.

○

After Hiroshi landed, Marine began combat with the airship. But it wasn't only Hiroshi who was watching. They were fighting near the Marlay village, and were close enough to be visible.

"The bugman flew that way. I can barely detect any mana, but I've got good eyes."

Nonimora pointed towards the airship. They'd come outside to chase the stolen Branch, but it seemed to be too late.

"So their friends are aboard that ship...?"

Akuto tried to gather mana in his hand to fire off a spell, but it didn't work right. He still wasn't used to the lack of energy and mana in this land.

"He said the Republic is attacking and there's probably gonna be a war!" Keena looked at Akuto, worried.

"We can't do anything until we know more about what's going on... And who's that fighting over there?" Akuto whispered. Korone handed him a telepathic call device. He'd been able to make and receive telepathic calls on his own easily lately, so it'd been a long time since he'd used one.

"A call?"

"It's from Yoshie Kita. It seems she has a handle on the situation."

Korone was right. Yoshi was in the command center with Yuko, and she breathlessly informed him on what was happening.

"I have three things to tell you. One: There are three candidates for Emperor right now. Keena. Nonimora. And Marine, the guy who's fighting. He's the King of the Republic."

"Why's he fighting C-MID8?"

"C-MID8 blew up the submarine force that was bringing him to the Empire. Brave saved him and is bringing him there so he can talk with the Empress. But it seems we've been interrupted again. I just lost touch with Brave right now."

"This is the worst-case scenario... I feel stupid saying this, but we just lost the Jeweled Branch."

"That's... a big problem. But the war hasn't started yet. The front lines are at the beach. Junko Hattori is in a town near the beach, and has managed to talk her dad out of opening fire, at least for now. This is the second thing I wanted to tell you."

"I'd like to head back there as soon as possible, but it seems there's not enough mana here for me to teleport."

"Find a way to get back here, and bring Marine with you. This is not a good situation. The guy from C-MID8 who destroyed the Republic submarines seems to have the same power you do."

"The same power as me?" Akuto gasped.

“Yeah. They managed to use the cells that were stolen from you to turn a normal person into a demon king. He’s currently in a standoff with the Republic fleet. Nobody can control him.”

“C-MID8 wants to start a war?” Akuto said, panicking.

“That’s what’s happening, probably. But I have this weird feeling that there’s more going on here. Like... I guess there’s a split within C-MID8, and some of them are trying to wipe out humanity. And the new Demon King is on the side of the people who are trying to destroy humanity. That was my third point. Shocking, huh?”

“So all this happened while we were out wandering the jungle?”

It was obvious now that C-MID8 had sent Akuto crashing into the jungle as part of a deliberate plot.

“So for now, we need to help him...”

Akuto looked up into the sky. But the battle between the airship and Marine was already over. Marine was being sucked into an open hatch in the airship. He was unconscious and floating in mid-air.

“So they’re one step ahead of us.” Akuto said, bitterly. As Marine went inside the airship, someone else flew out of it, and towards Akuto.

○

Meanwhile, after landing in the jungle, Hiroshi got a good distance away from the airship before deactivating his suit.

“Tch... What do I do now? This thing is useless...” he said to no one in particular. But someone *did* answer.

“I’m sorry about that. But there is another way.”

“Huh?”

For a moment he thought it was the suit’s activation bracelet that was talking to him, but when he turned in the direction of the voice, he froze.

“I realize that I’ve been asking a lot of you.”

It was Kento, AKA USD, the man behind this whole thing.

“You!”

Hiroshi went to summon a mana ball to fire at him, but realized there was no mana around him. He was surprised, and afraid, to see it, but when he realized that Kento was far calmer than he expected, he managed to control his fear.

“I don’t understand... Are you my enemy? Or ally?”

“You want me to make that clear? But I’m afraid I don’t know myself.”

Hiroshi realized his usual arrogance was no longer present.

“What’s happened to you? You disabled my suit when I tried to fight that Demon King. But you let me fight him above the ocean. And now you’re here in front of me. What the hell are you trying to do?”

Hiroshi shouted. But Kento just adjusted his glasses and calmly began to speak.

"The ship above is one I made. But now The One is aboard it."

"Who cares? I already heard that you were betrayed. I refused to help you, too. If there's something you want to tell me, then come out and say it! And if there really is some way to shoot down that stupid talking dog thing, then tell me!" Hiroshi said, overwhelmed with emotion. But Kento cut him off.

"The One is trying to give the Jeweled Branch to the King of the Republic."

"...Who gives a shit?"

"If he uses its power, even I don't know what will happen. But I do have an idea of what it is."

"What is it?"

"The Faceless Power seals away the minds of all the people in another dimension. And he's trying to release it."

Hiroshi froze for a moment and tried to think.

"...I have no idea why I should care, and I don't think that's because I'm stupid."

"And that difficulty is exactly what The One took advantage of. According to him, this will lead to liberation, and further advancement of magical civilization."

"Again, I have no idea what the hell you're trying to say. I'm sure there's a lot of complicated theoretical bullshit involved here. Just tell me what I need to know."

"I want to stop the Republic King from using the Jeweled Branch."

Hiroshi snorted.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that. He's not the kind of guy who would. If you want to stop that from happening, just bring down the ship. You made the thing, I'm sure you put in a shutdown, just like you did with this suit."

"Of course, I made it so I can shut down the ship. But I can't do that."

"Why the hell not?"

"They've taken a hostage. That's the kind of person... or dog... that The One is."

Kento's frustration was clear on his face.

"I had no idea you had a soft spot like that. So you want me to save this person? You're right, The One can't see us here. He won't know that you're asking me to do it. So, who's the hostage?"

Hiroshi wasn't even trying to hide his annoyance. He could see a moment's hesitation on Kento's face.

"What's going on? Is that hostage why you're acting weird?"

Again, Kento cut him off.

“It’s Kei. Kei is the hostage.”

“...Huh? You mean the guy who turned into the Demon King?” Hiroshi asked in surprise.

Kento nodded.

“That’s right. After he became a Demon King, I examined that device. It contains a system that allows The One to destroy Kei if he turns into a Demon King.”

“Why would he do that to one of his own people!?” Hiroshi shouted, without really thinking about who he was talking to. Kento sadly shook his head.

“We’re not all on the same side, in the end.”

“You don’t seem like somebody who really cares about his friends, either. ...Wait a second. If you were never really on the same side, how was he able to use him as a hostage? You knew from the start this was a dangerous business. You should’ve been ready for him to die from the start...!”

Hiroshi then suddenly realized. The look on Kento’s face, his attitude, everything indicated that he felt genuinely concerned. It felt like the same way he looked when he was worried about Yuko.

“Wait... Don’t tell me you’re...”

Hiroshi shook his head. Kei was a man, yes, but he certainly had a seductive air about him. Kento slowly nodded.

“I’m concerned about Kei,” Kento said. That explained everything, but it still wasn’t something he could accept.

“So that’s your weak point, huh? But so what? But you saw what he did to the people from the Republic! That’s why you didn’t disable my suit then!”

Then suddenly, Kento bowed to him.

“Please...”

“Huh?” Hiroshi froze.

“Please... Will you stop him? Even if he dies, I want to kill him for the choices he’s made. I don’t want him to die because The One used him as a hostage.”

Hiroshi didn’t know what to say.

“But... you can’t...! He was so cruel... He must’ve decided to be Demon King of his own will! To do that... He... he...”

But when he thought about it, he realized that what Kento wanted him to do was what he wanted to do, too. And more than anything, Kento was opening up and begging him.

Hiroshi’s thoughts were in chaos, but he already knew what he would do. And he knew it was an answer that Akuto would never give. Many times he’d wanted to be like Akuto, and this was the first time he’d felt like he’d found his own path.

“I’m going to kill him... If I have to,” Hiroshi said, and then

gulped.

"That's fine. I'm sure he'd be happy to die after losing in battle. That's who he is, you know."

"But I may not be able to defeat him with this suit. At least, if The One's told him how to counter it..."

"Don't worry. I told you, I have a way. I'll unlock more of its power. That should give you what you need to do this. Just do what the suit's voice system tells you to."

As the talk turned to specific tactics, Hiroshi's mind began to calm down. But he realized that his resolve was still just as strong.

"So, where is Kei?" Hiroshi asked. Kento's eyes narrowed.

"Facing off with the Republic army. He's being used as a threat to get the King to do what they want. The King saw Kei's massacre. If The One tells him that Kei's going to attack the Republic, that's an extremely effective threat."

"You said that's the kind of dog he is..."

Hiroshi activated his Brave Suit, and waited for Kento to do whatever it was he had to do. Kento attached a cord from a small terminal to the back of the suit, and began to fiddle with it.

"But if you can power me up, why am I going to Kei instead of the ship?"

"I'm not sure if you can defeat that ship. And if The One wants to use Kei to start a war, stopping Kei can stop the war, too."

"Understood. But will I make it in time?"

"I'll add a teleport spell. Use it once you get close enough to mainland that you have enough mana and energy."

"Got it."

Kento finished whatever he was doing with the suit, then nodded to Hiroshi.

"I'm counting on you," he said.

"Yeah... Of course, I still don't like you."

Hiroshi flew off. Behind him, The One's airship had finished its battle, and Marine was gone. He hadn't been shot down. Either he was captured, or entered after negotiations with The One.

○

"I'm going to have to ask why you're giving this to me."

Marine felt ashamed of the position he found himself in, but he still stared boldly at the dog across the room.

"You can't just accept it's a gesture of goodwill?"

He was talking to The One, who was curled up on top of a cushion. They were in the airship's lounge. Marine was sitting in a chair across from The One. He wasn't being held captive, and at a glance it just looked like a man sitting in a room with a dog.

But the atmosphere was tense. Marine had been defeated, and then invited inside the ship. It was a humiliating experience, but he didn't despair or lose hope. He seemed to be looking right through The One.

"However, we believe that to be a power which brings true liberation. It's not something to be used carelessly."

Marine looked at the Jeweled Branch, which was placed on The One's cushion. At first glance, it appeared to be nothing but a stick. But Marine knew that it was something special.

"I'm aware that that's what your legends say. But what do you believe 'true liberation' means?" The One asked.

"The Republic's greatest ideal is liberation. What the Empire calls 'black magic' was something we established," Marine answered, but The One continued speaking.

"And you've already achieved that, right? Magic is something available to all. Or are you angry about having to spend so long under the waves? Does 'liberation' mean the destruction of the empire?"

"We do hate the Empire, yes. But the ideals that lie at our core are a different matter. We want eternity. That is true liberation."

"And what does that mean?"

"We believe in the existence of the soul. A soul in the true sense, not what the gods the Empire created speak of."

"You mean life after death? Does that mean the Republic is even more religious than the Empire?" The One said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. But Marine remained calm.

"You're free to think of it that way if you like. In fact, there are many who do not fear death."

"They believe death is liberation?"

"And that death should be dealt to the empire, as well. And they believe that the Faceless Power is what will do it. They believe that it allows them to bind death to their will," Marine said, with the face of someone who'd just been asked a very difficult question. Many of his citizens hated the Empire for driving them under the ocean, enough to want to kill them.

"But you seem to feel differently," The One said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Marine nodded.

"Correct. It's a mistake to use the Faceless Power for destruction. And an even bigger mistake to think that all mankind could become nothing but souls."

"But, you know..." The One said, pausing for a moment.

"But?"

"But we know that's the truth. That humans can become soul-like bodies that last for eternity." His words seemed intended to inspire

some reaction in Marine.

"You're saying it's true...?" Marine looked doubtful. But The One began to explain, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"It's true. And we know it's true because the Faceless Power is nothing less than the souls of another race. The people of the Empire are plotting to use that power for their own purposes."

Marine waited a moment to answer. After thinking for a while, he shook his head softly.

"And what do you intend to do with it? Are you not a part of the Empire as well? What I need to know is what you really think."

The One stood up from his cushion when he heard this.

"I see. You want to know what I really think. Then it seems I need to show you who I really am. I am what you would call an alien."

Marine raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Oh?"

But there was a note of doubt in his voice. The One ignored it, and continued.

"And the Faceless Power is the souls of my race. That's why I want them freed. Liberation, to me, is the liberation of my race."

"...And what happens when they're liberated?" Marine asked, cautiously. He was trying to use that answer to see if The One was telling the truth. The One answered in a calm voice.

"A revolution. The revolution you long for in the bottom of your heart."

"Revolution!"

In contrast to his usual self, Marine's voice was trembling. This was what he'd truly wanted from the bottom of his heart.

"You wanted a future where both the people of the Republic and the people of the Empire were truly connected on a psychic level. And you thought that the Faceless Power could help you achieve that. Am I wrong?"

Marine said nothing. He wasn't disagreeing, instead he felt like someone was peering into the bottom of his soul. The One's voice grew louder.

"The Faceless Power grants wishes... That is one way to think of it. When they are liberated, the souls of my race will resonate with those of humanity, and reflect the hearts of mankind, creating a power that is magical... no, greater than magic. The greatest ideal of what the Empire calls black magic, and what the republic calls magic, is, at its core, a direct reflection of the human mind, is it not? And that's what I'm offering you. Releasing the Faceless Power means releasing us. It is true communication between heart and heart. And it will bring you a new magic."

"A new magic..."

Marine could feel himself wavering. The dog in front of him seemed like a demon from an old legend, tempting him with his greatest desire. But Marine was able to remain calm.

"...I still need time. Releasing such a thing should not be done lightly."

He reflexively wiped the sweat off his brow. Living at the bottom of the sea for so long had left him with a fervent desire for people to understand one another. He'd thought it was just a fantasy, and now he was being told it could be made his. He could do nothing but shiver.

"No, I think it should be done quickly," The One said.

A mana screen appeared. It was showing Kei Sakura, the devil, facing off with a Republic submarine unit.

"What...?!" Marine gasped.

"Will the nobles of the Republic obey your orders?" The One said, wickedly.

Marine realized that this alien could read the minds of men. He wondered to himself if it was possible to rebel against such a creature. But he decided to bluff.

"They will. And there are those in the Empire who want peace, as well. They won't start a war that easily..."

"Correct," The One said, cutting him off.

"Correct. It's not easy to start a war. But I can see your uncertainty, and it tells me you don't trust humanity as much you claim you do."

"...Why do you want the Faceless Power so badly, that you're willing to threaten me like this?" Marine asked in a pained voice.

"Because I want to see what it is that humanity truly wants. Wars have always had an element of coincidence or manipulation to them. But if humans can have what they truly want, what happens then? That's what I want to know." The One laughed.

"So it's simple curiosity?" Marine asked.

"No. There's a deeper meaning. But it remains beyond your comprehension. Now, place your bet. There's very little time left. Will you do nothing, and allow your country to be destroyed by the Empire, or use the Faceless Power to grant the wishes of the Republic's people? Just as The One said those words, however, there was movement on the mana screen. Several of the submarines had fired missiles up into the sky.

"No!" Marine gasped. He knew what those missiles were. Unlike anti-air or anti-surface missiles, these missiles left long trails of smoke as they headed high up into the sky.

"Oh? Those are the weapons that were abandoned in the distant past, aren't they?" The One said in a mocking tone.

“Nuclear weapons...” Marine said, despairingly. They were ballistic missiles, missiles that shoot high up into the air and then plummet downwards, making them almost impossible to intercept. The missiles were equipped with nuclear warheads. A direct hit would destroy even the greatest shields mana civilization had.

“So this is what they brought to deal with the devil? Is this bad luck, or perhaps human fate?”

The One laughed. Marine silently reached out a hand.

“Yes?” the devilish dog snorted. “You know what I want. Just give it to me. I don’t want to have to say it aloud.”

Marine moved closer to him. The dog laughed, baring its gums.

“Tell me, what is it humans want? What is it that you want?”

The devil dog picked up the stick with his mouth, and then handed it over with a paw.

○

“Please make it in time...”

Hiroshi was in a hurry, but the suit wasn’t that fast.

“Nothing’s happened yet, so don’t worry... Huh? The Republic launched some kind of missile?”

He heard Yuko begin to panic from his communicator.

“Yuko, what do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I’m just telling you what sis said. They fired some kind of rocket-like missile that flew up into the sky.”

“Is there going to be a war?”

“I don’t know that yet. We don’t have orders from dad yet...”

“Don’t do anything rash. If I can defeat that devil, and prove that we’re not all like him, we may be able to work this out.”

Hiroshi checked the mana and energy levels in the air around him.

“It’s not dense enough to teleport yet...”

He said. Just then, he heard a scream from Yuko.

“Sis? What? What happened?”

“Yuko? What’s going on?”

There was no answer.

“Sis! Sis! Come in!”

All he could hear was her screams, and incoherent shouting from the other people in the room with her.

“What’s going on?” he yelled.

Someone answered him. It was Yoshie.

“She’s panicking right now, so I’ll answer for her. Something’s going on at the front lines. I should be able to send video soon. Brace yourself for this.”

Her voice was far more serious than it usually was.

“Wait... No... Did one of the missiles hit?” Hiroshi asked.

“That would be bad enough, but it’s even worse.”

“What is it?”

“All the evil in the world... Something came down from the heavens. It wasn’t despair. It wasn’t fear. It was evil.”

Yoshie’s expressions were usually overwrought, but somehow it felt like this time, she might be right. The video came in.

“What... what the hell is this?”

○

“The One has already got the Jeweled Branch.”

It was the member of C-MID8 who could shrink and grow his body.

“And the King of the Republic is with him, you said. Why is he trying to make the King use the Jeweled Branch?” Akuto asked.

They were in the sky above the village. It was filled with bugs created by the member of C-MID8. They were like huge beetles, and were very clearly dangerous. Beyond the army of beetles was The One’s airship. After he’d delivered the Branch, the member of C-MID8 had come back to stop Akuto and the others from getting to the airship.

“Yeah! Get out of our way! It’s dangerous to use the Jeweled Branch when you have an evil heart!” Nonimora yelled.

The two of them were floating in the sky, trying to get as close to The One as possible. But with the lack of energy and mana, they couldn’t fly like they usually could.

“Don’t be in such a hurry. By the way, I forgot to introduce myself. I am Codename Morlock, part of C-MID8.”

The man calling himself Morlock had shrunk to half the size of a normal man.

“...Thanks for the introduction. Now answer my question.”

“You’ll know soon regardless, but very well. Essentially, I want to start a war.”

“...Is that all?”

“Personally, yes. Other members may have more complicated ideas. But I believe that you can’t have advancement without war. In the end, this is going to make for a wonderful world.”

Morlock grinned.

“This guy’s kinda creepy,” Nonimora said, disgusted.

“So is C-MID8 basically just a group of escapees from a mental hospital?” Akuto asked. Then he tensed and readied himself for combat.

“I couldn’t do it earlier, but now I’m used to the lack of mana. We’re breaking through.”

Morlock just laughed.

“You can’t. I’m an expert at operating on minimal energy. Even I keep half of my body inside Virtual Phase Space at all times, and can efficiently use energy by changing my size in the real world. This means that I...”

Just as Morlock began a lengthy explanation of his abilities, something cut him off.

“Ackie! Something happened to Junko...!” Keena was below, screaming. She’d been in constant communication with the palace until then. Akuto’s face changed color when he heard the fear in her voice.

“What did you do...?” Akuto looked at Morlock with cold eyes. A single look at his face was enough to reduce Morlock’s monologue to a stammering mess.

“Uuh... Y-You can see... for yourself... Hah...hahahah...”

○

“What the hell is that?” Junko asked.

Through the window of the command center, she could see smoke from what looked like a rocket rising up from the sea.

“A ballistic missile. It goes up to orbit and then comes back down. Don’t worry. We can shoot it down when it falls. Our air units have already been given orders. If it’s non-nuclear, we’ll be able to contain the explosion,” one of the ninjas explained.

“Non-nuclear?” Junko asked.

“Nuclear weapons can’t be blocked with mana,” the Ninja nodded.

“But that technology was abandoned years ago. There’s no way they’d use it.”

“I hope so... but this means a war’s started, doesn’t it?” Junko said, depressed.

“Maybe we weren’t able to avoid it, yes.”

Just as he said that, though, Junko felt something cold run down her spine.

—What is this awful feeling?

She looked around the command room. Everyone there seemed to share her feeling.

“Hey, did you feel something?” Junko asked, and the answers came back.

“Yes. Something awful... It wasn’t magical. It’s strange. The mana isn’t responding at all.”

“Did it come from above?” One looked up into the sky. Junko’s gaze followed his. It was raining.

—Rain? There was no sign of rain, and weather control should be active for this area...

But as the droplets of what she’d thought were rain fell, the whole

area began to burn.

“What...?”

She looked closer. She couldn’t see the fire clearly. The flames were colorless, and the whole air shimmered like a mirage. But the flames remained without disappearing. The colorless flames were spreading across the ground. The grass burned, turning from green to black, and then to ash. It happened everywhere one of the drops of water fell. No, perhaps what was falling from the sky were the flames themselves.

“Aaaaah...!”

One of the ninjas screamed in terror. She turned towards him, and realized what it was he was looking at. The rain was starting to melt the windows and walls of the command room.

“Stand strong! Try the shields!” Junko commanded. But all she heard back was a scream.

“We’re already trying it!”

“...What?”

The rain was starting to fall over a wider area now, turning everything it touched to ash.

“I-Is this an enemy weapon?” Junko’s voice was shaking, though she didn’t realize it.



“I don’t know... But this is impossible!”

The flames, neither red nor blue, were burning everything. The whole observation deck where the command room was located was starting to collapse. Through the melting windows, she could see the walls turning to ash and blowing away. Junko’s face twisted in fear. It wasn’t the fear of facing death. It was because the colorless flames seemed to represent all the evil of mankind. Junko’s body began to shake, and she fell to her knees. The unfathomable evil had left her paralyzed.

Everyone was watching... Watching the invisible flames come down from the sky, and burn the city and the army. Everyone could feel the evil within it.

“Let’s say that divine punishment is real. But divine punishment is only punishment because someone wanted it to happen. If a good person is burned, it’s not punishment, it’s just bad luck. In other words, what you’re seeing now is the reflection of someone’s heart. Someone wanted this to happen. Of course, you wanted the missiles to disappear. And that wish came true. But you also granted the wish of the people of the republic. And some of them wanted the empire to burn to ash.”

The One spoke, and Marine knew better than anyone that what he was saying was true. He understood that his connection with the Faceless Power had granted the people of the Republic’s wish. The mana screen was showing the most terrible scene imaginable. From above, it looked like a gray circle spreading out across the ground. But it used to be a town. Everything was burnt into ash and rubble in the span of an instant. The seaside town was a vision of hell. There was no sound of any living thing whatsoever. The only things moving were the ash, blowing in the wind, and clumps of falling concrete.

“I’m seeing the real hell. And a real devil,” Marine whispered in despair, as he looked at the devilish dog.

○

Akuto was looking at Morlock. But he was seeing the video, and hearing the audio. He was receiving the same information Keena’s terminal was, but in an even clearer form. This was possible because he was able to control the weak mana signal at an even higher precision than the mechanical device. His body had adapted to the low mana environment. Or perhaps, the information he was receiving had put him into an extreme state of concentration.

“There’s no response from the Katsuura Command Center!”

“According to local reports everything in a 4 kilometer radius has been vaporized. The status of the defense forces is unknown!”

“Sis! Come in, sis!”

“The cause of the destruction is unknown. It may be an enemy weapon.”

The channels were full of different messages going back and forth. But there was only one thing he cared about.

“So the eldest daughter of the Hattori, the commander of the guards, is dead?” Akuto asked Morlock in a low, but surprisingly calm voice.

“H-How should I know...” Morlock was trying his best to do a mocking laugh, and failing utterly. His voice was breaking.

“I’m asking for your opinion. Do you think she’s alive? Or do you think she’s dead?” Akuto repeated himself.

“W-What do you care? Of course she’s dead! That thing burnt a whole city to ash. If anybody was alive, they’d have contacted someone by now.” Morlock said, unsure of why he was being asked this.

“So you think if she was there, she’s dead, then. So, what did you think about that?”

“W-Why are you asking me this? It’s got nothing to do with me. I didn’t do it. As far as I know, that’s a manifestation of the Faceless Power. I’m sure you’ve heard what that thing is. If it happened, it means the people of the Republic wanted it to happen. So it’s not my fault.”

Akuto was calm, but Morlock was starting to lose it. Akuto asked another question.

“I asked what you thought. Don’t worry about whether or not it’s your fault. You weren’t thinking about anything, is what you’re telling me. You really weren’t thinking about anything at all.”

“H-Have you gone crazy? So what? Nobody thinks about it. What do I think about a bunch of people dying? Who even cares?”

“No, I just wanted to ask the question. For some reason, I’ve got this thing about not killing people. No, what I don’t like is doing anything that affects others. You can call it cowardice if you like. I don’t care. But it means no matter how mad I am, I don’t feel like killing anyone.”

Akuto’s voice was completely calm. Either Morlock decided he knew what was coming next, or he simply couldn’t take the tension anymore, because he uncrossed his arms (he’d been crossing them to look tough) and readied himself for battle.

“Enough talk! You’re telling me you want to fight, right?”

Akuto silently shook his head.

“A fight? Maybe the old me would’ve felt that way. Don’t you get it? I’m trying to come up with a good enough reason to slaughter you.”

When he finished speaking, all the air around him changed. In the

next moment, his face transformed into something different, something filled with madness and terror like no one had ever seen.

Afterword

Thanks for buying the book!

It's me, Shoutarou Mizuki.

This is the start of a new arc, with more than one part. I haven't really decided what happens yet, but I can tell you that the next book is a continuation of the one you're reading now. Personally, I'm hoping there's several more to come... Look forward and find out what happens!

If you're coming in from the anime, reading volume 10 should get you up to speed. If you want to read what happens after the anime, you can get volume 6, and read from there. The last volumes of the DVD and blu-ray are also available for purchase, so you can buy them and see the whole thing too.

Now, as for what I'm doing these days, I'm sitting on my ass watching satellite TV. I love watching obscure sports, but what I'm really enjoying now is old idol movies. Stuff starting Momoko Kikuchi and the Onyanko Club. All of them have this strange kind of charm that just makes you feel confused just watching it.

It's not what you usually hear, which is that the idols are bad, but they've got this "We can do whatever we want as long as we put an idol onscreen" thing going which makes them go far beyond your typical movie. It's probably not a good idea to take any tips from them, but they do get my creative juices flowing...

Lastly, thank you to everyone who helped with this project, and of course, the readers. The anime and the manga are pretty much over, but I'll be at this for a while more, and I hope you'll stay with me.

There's lots more fun to come!

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by Shoutarou Mizuki

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